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TIME WILL TELL:

A Story of Society.

By S. W. FULLOM,

AUTHOR OF "THE GREAT HIGHWAY," "FOR LOVE OR MONEY," "THE MAN OF THE WORLD," ETC., ETC.

"The end crowns all,
And that old common arbitrator, Time,
Will one day end it." SHAKESPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TO

DR. SPENCER THOMSON,

M.D., L.R.C.S.E.,

OF ASHTON, TORQUAY,

AUTHOR OF THE "DICTIONARY OF MEDICINE," "WANDERINGS AMONG WILD FLOWERS," ETC., ETC.,

THIS STORY IS INSCRIBED,

IN APPRECIATION OF HIS PROFESSIONAL

AND LITERARY TALENTS,

AND IN TOKEN OF ESTEEM,

BY THE AUTHOR.

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TIME WILL TELL.

CHAPTER I.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

"I HOPED to find you happier, mamma," said a young girl, her arms encircling her mother's neck, while she gazed in her face.

She had bounded into the room in her hat and mantle, having just arrived from Paris, and her eyes, as she entered, beamed with expectation. And her mother, too, had brightened, though the brightness came through tears, an effect the girl instantly noted, and reflected herself.

Little more than seventeen in years, she seemed but a blossom beside her mother;

for time was crumbling one flower while it unfolded the other. Their faces presented that resemblance common in such relations, which, however, might pass unmarked, only the daughter's embracing arms now brought them in conjunction, and made it apparent. The likeness was divided, as it were, by the flight of a day, the girl being fresh and blooming, in beauty's morning, while the beauty of the mother was as an autumn sunset, the hues dulled and the light under a cloud.

"I thought home would be pleasanter now papa has come into so much property," continued the girl, mournfully.

"Let us not speak of this now, Annie, dear," replied her mother. "You must be fagged after your journey; and Miss Balcombe, too—where have you left her?"

"She heard papa was engaged, and would not come in," answered Annie, with a vexed look. "She has friends close by, and she ordered the cabman to drive her on."

"I think she ought to have seen me. She was sent to Paris to bring you home,

and—and—but they all learn to treat me as a cipher."

"Dearest mamma," said Annie, with a caress; "at least I shall now be with you, and we shall be happy in that."

"Yes, if that might be, dear Annie!"

"Why should it not be?"

Mrs. Blandford seemed to evade the question. "Come, you must have something to eat," she said. "It was last night you crossed the Channel, I suppose?"

"Yes; and we had a good rest at Dover, so I am not at all tired."

But she yielded to her mother's wishes. The servant brought in luncheon, and she sat down and made a pretence of eating, saying little till the tray was removed. Then she spoke in a more cheerful tone—

"What is this about an estate, mamma?" she said. "You have given me only dark hints in your letter. What estate is it, and how does it come to papa?"

She had touched a warped chord, and the response told of new troubles.

"It comes from the Holmes family, to

which he is the heir; but it is entailed on males, and your father's grievance is, that having no son, at his death it passes to a stranger. Mr. Charles Harrifield, the heir presumptive of Lord Bramblecourt, will get it, not you, Annie."

"I don't want it," replied Annie; "so don't let that disturb you, mamma."

"Unfortunately it affects us both very much, dear, and may cause us great trouble."

"In what way, mamma?"

"It is a story I have never told you, but, I fear, we are completely at your father's mercy, and this business embitters his feeling towards us."

"Has it not always been embittered?" said Annie, her cheek flushing. "At least, he has never been kind—he has never been to me what you have, mamma, and to you I have thought him cruel."

"It was not so once," sighed Mrs. Blandford, "nor can I say that he has ever treated me harshly—only coldly, Annie. But it is time you should know how I stand to him,

for this it is that makes me uneasy. His first wife was my sister."

"Your own sister! How strange!"

"It is a sad story, altogether. She was a year older than I; our father died when we were children, and she was my mother's favourite, so had everything she wished for. She fell in love with your papa, when he was a suitor to me, and she and my mother lured him from me."

Annie, who had dropped her eyes, now looked up again, but made no remark.

"My mother lived to see them married, and that was all. At her death she left my sister all her fortune. Nothing fell to me but a small annuity, derived from my father."

"How cruel!" murmured Annie.

"My sister soon followed your grandmamma to the grave, when circumstances threw your father and me much together; I could not forget—I never had forgotten, that he once professed to love me, and he declared that his sentiments had never changed. He ascribed his marriage with

my sister to the manœuvres of my mother, and her confidante—who had once been the confidante of his own mother. I was willing to believe what my heart wished. So he persuaded me to accompany him to Prussia, where a marriage with a deceased wife's sister is allowed; and it was thought that this legalised our union in England."

"And does it not?" cried Annie, breathlessly.

"When I noted a growing coldness in your father, I began to have misgivings about it, and I have lived in terror ever since. But our jeopardy was increased by your father's succession to the Holmes estate, because he has become so anxious to bequeath this property to a son; and this morning he dropped some words which have struck me to the earth!"

"What did he say?" asked Annie, bending forward, as her mother hesitated, and gazing in her face, at the same time catching her hand, and clasping it in both her own. "Tell me, mamma, I have long felt there was something unspoken between us—some-

thing in which I might give you comfort, the comfort of sympathy, at least. You have now admitted me to your confidence; tell me all. We may advise together, for I am no longer a child. The year I have passed at the school in Paris has so altered me: you must see it has!"

The mother raised her eyes, and rested them on Annie, as if to note the change, but the glance was listless, and seemed to take nothing in. She did perceive—she had before perceived, indeed, that Annie was become a beauty—only the mother's pride was now overborne by anxiety for the future. Her brow cleared, notwithstanding; for no woman could look on such a daughter unmoved. Annie's face struck at once—at the first glance. Not that she possessed a showy complexion: her face was so toned by sentiment that it rather appeared under a veil, but it was a veil of soul. The effect was now heightened by the downcast gaze of her eyes, which were almost hid by the fringe of long, silken lashes. What impressed was the delicate tints, the soft out-

lines, and the environing air of romance, presenting her as in a dream. The style of her beauty changed when she raised her eyes—eyes of the rarest shade of hazel, so clear and deep, and beaming, that they claimed to be called amber. And the same term would almost describe her hair, which was a bright chestnut, and enclasped her brow, like a queen's crown—then escaped from under her hat, and threw two curls on her neck.

"I have little more to tell you, Annie," her mother answered, "except that he said *we must separate!*"

"What did he mean?" said Annie, wildly.

"I considered him to mean that he would try to annul our marriage," her mother replied, with a flood of tears.

There was a pause, as if the words suggested thoughts which both mother and daughter shrank from uttering, but to which neither could shut her eyes. They had been silent but a moment, however, when the ringing of a bell, from an upper room, caused them both to start.

"That is *his* bell," said Annie. "No doubt he has seen me arrive, and is enquiring for me. I must go to him."

"You think he will like it?" replied Mrs. Blandford, dubiously. "Well, do what you think best; and, remember, nothing binds him to me but you, Annie."

"My poor, dear mamma."

They embraced, and Annie left the room.

CHAPTER II.

MR. BLANDFORD.

The bell rang, as Annie conjectured, from Mr. Blandford's room, so called from being exclusively devoted to that gentleman, and only accessible on his invitation. The house stood in the Clapham Road, and the apartment looked out on a back garden, closed by the backs of other houses, and on a distant gasometer. But it may be doubted if these features were known to Mr. Blandford, who cared little for the beauties of nature, whether the nature was metropolitan or rural, and nothing drew him to a window but the sound of a carriage stopping before the house. Otherwise he took life easy. A moderate independence had placed him above

work, from his youth up, and afforded him means for some indulgences; for he found society at his club, so never entertained at his own house.

He was a fine-looking man, on the shady side of forty, and had rounded the Cape gallantly—not without damage, a line here, and a dint there, but with his face still bright, and his figure untouched. In fact, a man half his age might have found him a dangerous rival in a lady's bower.

Mr. Blandford was now in council with his lawyer, Henry Ravel. He was not a vicious man, nor altogether what the world accounted heartless; for he entertained a certain reverence for right, and was even capable of affection, though of a cold, uncertain kind. Hence he felt some repugnance to the project under his consideration. But his dominant feeling was love of self, and this generated a habit of seeing everything in a light consonant with his own wishes, so that he no sooner formed a design than he saw reason to believe it immaculate. Nor did his opinion waver if the design was

a little crooked, provided it answered the end. Like the Jesuits, he considered it just to commit a small wrong in order to do a great right, the right being rendered to himself, and he balanced the wrong by what he deemed a compensation. The present case rather strained his conscience—it was doing right with such a decided eye to profit, and he found some difficulty in resisting this conclusion. But the fact grew more and more obscured; his scruples vanished before his logic; and the lawyer found him in a frame of mind to do right at all risks—provided there was none to himself.

Mr. Ravel was ready for his bidding—to a certain point, and this point Mr. Blandford was not likely to overstep. Under a composed aspect and dignified mien, Mr. Ravel's mind was, in fact, more supple than another man's back, but not beyond his own notions of *meum* and *tuum*. In short, he was no rogue, but simply hastened to be rich—not by years of toil, nor through the drudgery of his profession, but by hook or

by crook, as he found it expedient. Hence it was impossible for him to be mealy-mouthed, or to stick at trifles, though he took care both to keep within the law, and to do nothing to compromise his respectability.

"All is settled with the house-agent, I presume?" said Mr. Blandford.

"Everything, sir. I have taken over the house, furniture, carriage, horses, and servants, just as they stand," replied the lawyer. "The carriage has been panelled with your arms, and the servants have assumed your liveries. I have arranged that you shall accompany me there this morning, and be put in possession."

"That is well. And the other matter—" here Mr. Blandford betrayed the slightest touch of embarrassment—"this very painful business."

"Very painful, indeed," observed Mr. Ravel, furtively scanning his client, before he helped him out.

"A great trial to me."

"No doubt, sir."

"But you observed that the judge decided, in the suit my letter pointed out to you, that a marriage in Prussia was just as invalid as in England, and so granted a decree of nullity."

"Yes."

"Humph! I think I instructed you to submit my case to a proctor."

"And I have done so, sir. I obtained the opinion this morning, and it—"

Mr. Ravel drew a paper from his pocket, and handed it to Mr. Blandford, who ran his eye over the contents.

"I am free!" he exclaimed, unguardedly; then recollected himself, and his cheek flushed as he quietly added—"free to act liberally in this matter. I wish to be thoroughly liberal, Mr. Ravel. Mrs. Blandford—for so I must still call her—has spent a great part of her life with me, and now incurs some—some appearance of humiliation, you see; so I wish to make her what will not only be a liberal allowance, but even a *compensation*."

"A very just view, sir."

"I think the principle is just," Mr. Blandford resumed. "And I wish you to break the business to her—the sooner the better: to-morrow, say. She can stay here till quarter-day, when our tenancy expires, and I shall have provided her a more suitable residence by that time. She shall also have an allowance of seven hundred a year, and I will relieve her of all charge for our daughter; but she is to undertake to give her up to me, and to hold no communication with her for the present—you understand, *for the present.*"

"Perfectly," said Mr. Ravel, discerning that *for the present* meant *for ever.*

"You can have no difficulty in arranging this for me?"

"Not the least, sir. What you propose, is, of course, for the young lady's interest."

"Just so. I see I can leave the matter to you, and as we have brought up Miss Blandford's name, and you mention her interest, it might be mutually advantageous if we went a little more into this branch of the

subject. I should like to consult you on a point connected with it."

"Be assured, you may command my best advice."

"I may want something more—your co-operation," smiled Mr. Blandford, with slight emphasis. "The truth is, I should like to secure an interest for my daughter in the succession to the estate. This, as you know, goes, in default of male issue of mine, to Charles Harrifield, who is also heir presumptive to your client, Lord Bramblecourt. Mr. Harrifield's means are not large, and he is a bit of a squanderer. Now, suppose he and my daughter were to match, and I dowered her with a third of the rents during my life."

"A third of the rents is a large offer," remarked the lawyer, with some surprise.

"It will be a compensation to him."

"What is he to be compensated for? he always knew you were the first inheritor, and that he has no claim unless you fail of male issue."

"True," said Mr. Blandford, with his

usual suavity, though not till after a moment's pause, as if for recollection. "But I may now contract another marriage, and this might throw him out, you see."

The lawyer glanced askance at the speaker, and then bent his head: he had suddenly remembered some rumour of a flaw in Mr. Blandford's title.

"You consider this affair will be difficult?" said Mr. Blandford.

"It will require management, sir. Your divorce will be an obstacle, from its rendering Miss Blandford illegitimate."

"She won't be so in the estimation of society. She will still bear my name, and be recognised as my daughter. And I think the divorce tells just as much the other way, because it increases the probability of my having a male heir; and Mr. Harrifield will see that by marrying Miss Blandford, he not only makes sure of a present interest in the estate, but also raises a barrier to my marrying again. Will you think this over?"

"I will give it immediate attention."

"That is well," said Mr. Blandford. "And

now we will go to the new house, and take possession of it."

They rose together, and it was at this moment that Mr. Blandford, as has been already mentioned, rang the bell, bringing up the housemaid.

"Was that any one for me arrived in the cab, just now?" he asked.

"It was Miss Blandford, sir," answered the servant.

"Oh!"

And he walked out of the house in company with the lawyer.

The servant met Annie on the stairs.

"Is papa alone now, Mary?" Annie asked.

"He's gone out with Mr. Ravel, Miss," replied the servant. And she related what had passed.

"Well, he knows I am here," observed Annie, her lip trembling at this display of her father's indifference. "Tell mamma I have gone to my own room, Mary."

And she retreated along the passage.

CHAPTER III.

THE SEPARATION.

NOTHING could be completer than Mr. Blandford's dominion over his wife and daughter. He was never harsh, and never spoke in anger, yet he had brought them to regard him with awe, and he required but to say "do this," and it was done, or "go there," and they went. They could have given no reason for their compliance; it was a habit, and they obeyed, because they never dreamt of resisting.

Both were disquieted at his going out without seeing Annie, and their uneasiness increased when hour succeeded hour and he continued absent. They understood that his succession to property involved arrange-

ments which might take him out unexpectedly, and hence they would have thought little of the incident on another occasion; but he had not seen Annie for a year; he knew she had arrived; and at a time when they had so much reason for misgiving, it seemed ominous that he left her ungreeted. They expected that he would return to dinner, but he made no appearance, nor had he come back when the household retired to rest; not that this was unusual, as he let himself in with a latch-key, at all hours. But no step on the stairs announced his return to-night, and the morrow found him still absent, making them both miserable. Thus they watched for him through the morning, alternately expecting and dreading, and, with strained ears, starting at every knock at the door.

Annie tried to reassure her mother, and did afford her comfort, though she could not give her courage—the courage a sense of wrong began to kindle in herself. She was really as depressed as her mother, but she was nerved by resentment, which inspired

her with self-reliance. She had brooded over such experiences before, and they had been silently consolidating her character, moulding it unnoted, and fostering qualities ready to be developed. Their influence was felt by Mrs. Blandford, without her realising their scope, and the mother leant on her child.

"Here is papa, in a carriage," cried Annie, suddenly, as she looked from the window of the drawing-room, late in the afternoon.

Mrs. Blandford left her chair, and peered round the curtain, so as to keep out of view from the outside. At the gate was a carriage and pair, with liveried coachman and footman, and Mr. Blandford had just alighted, in company with Mr. Ravel. They stood a moment, and then walked up the garden to the house.

"What has he brought Mr. Ravel for again?" said Mrs. Blandford to Annie, with a dismayed look.

Annie's heart sank, she knew not why—except that she was infected by the undefined dread of her mother.

Mr. Blandford left the lawyer below, and entered the drawing-room alone.

"Ah, Annie! you are back again," he said, with his blandest air; and his eyes ran over her face and form, brightening in the survey. "You have grown a woman—and a devilish fine one, I must say. Well, you have come back just in time, for I want to take you to our new house."

He spoke as if he had been away but an hour, and they ventured no reference to his protracted absence.

"Are we to go this evening, papa?" asked Annie.

"This moment," he answered, with a smile. "Take with you only what is necessary, and your other traps can follow to-morrow. How soon will you be ready—I suppose ten minutes will do?"

"Mamma can't be ready in that time, I am afraid."

"Oh, yes, yes, Annie, if our things are to remain till to-morrow," said Mrs. Blandford, timidly.

"Well, you have business to attend to

here," rejoined her husband. "Mr. Ravel is waiting to see you in the dining-room, and you had better go to him." And he added to Annie, "You can bid your mother good evening."

They were used to obey, and raised no objection, nor did Annie seem disturbed, though a tremor seized her mother, and she could hardly return her embrace. Annie hastened away, leaving Mrs. Blandford with her husband. He walked to the window, and looked out, humming an air.

"Am I to join Annie, to-morrow, Robert?" the wife asked, after a moment's pause.

"Go down to Mr. Ravel, and he will tell you all our arrangements," answered Mr. Blandford, mildly. "I have entrusted them to him, and there is no use going over them twice."

"No," she replied, and added desperately, "But—but I hope I am not to be parted from her long."

And she passed out of the room—unanswered, but not unmarked. There was a kind of sentiment about Mr. Blandford, and

this gave sadness to the reflection that they would never meet again—that he had heard that voice for the last time. But it was a momentary vibration—like a blow on a rock—felt, but leaving no impression. And there stood his carriage and horses to divert his attention. Moreover he knew that he was acting right, and, however trying to our feelings, the determination to act right gives an inward strength, when it leads to the object we wish. He had won this woman in her youth, and been eighteen years her husband, but the law now invalidated such marriages, and to prolong the connexion would be a public scandal. True he was not bound to take away her child. But the child was also his, and he relieved her of a burden, while securing the girl advantages she could not otherwise obtain.

These were the motives he would have put forward—and uot untruly—for he felt the tie of nature in Annie, and coveted her affection, at the same time that he looked to her forming a brilliant marriage. But he was also prompted to this course by other

considerations which it might not be convenient to avow.

Hardly had he reviewed these thoughts when he turned from the window, and followed his wife from the room, fearing she would intercept Annie, and concert some alliance. But Mrs. Blandford had no faculty for plotting, and she went straight to the dining-room to meet the lawyer.

Meantime, Annie reached her chamber, but, instead of dressing, sat down to reflect, a habit so inveterate with her on such occasions, that it might be called a part of her toilet. She thus fell into a whirl of thought, while Mr. Blandford was expecting her appearance, and it required a message to recall her to the duty of equipping herself. Mr. Blandford knew, indeed, that getting ready was not one of her virtues, and, besides being of too serene a nature to be ever ruffled, was content that she should, as he thought, spend some time at her glass, so he showed no impatience when she at last appeared. Mary followed them to the carriage, and put in a small bag.

"You haven't taken a lady's license, and smothered us with luggage, Annie," smiled Mr. Blandford.

"This is all I need till to-morrow, papa," Annie answered quietly.

"Then we want no more," he returned. And he called out to the footman "*home!*"

The word thrilled Annie's ear, as the carriage drove off.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MANSION IN GREAT STANHOPE STREET.

Mr. Blandford wished to be very friendly with Annie. He wanted to break down the barrier raised between them by his coldness in time past, and lure her into a bond of affection. But, to his chagrin, he was met by coldness on her part; so after two attempts to draw her into conversation, he desisted, seeing the moment was inopportune. Something must be allowed for habit, he thought; and Annie had been too much accustomed to regard him with awe, to rush all at once into familiarity. Moreover, she had probably been listening to complaints from her mother, and he longed to tell his version of the story, though, on reflectio

he decided to avoid details, and confine his communication to what it was absolutely necessary she should know. Even this he deferred; for, understanding, and perhaps over-estimating the effect produced by glitter on women, he conceived that his disclosure would be taken better by Annie amidst the splendour of her new home.

Just now, too, it must be confessed, he hardly felt up to the mark; for, in spite of the calm in his face, the readiness of his smile, and the modulations of his voice, he felt uneasy within. Annie had taken him by surprise; he parted with her a child; she returned a woman, and a beauty; and he saw that he had committed a blunder in neglecting to hail her arrival. Then was the time to make his point, when he could have met her at the door, and received her with open arms. Now, whether from habitual constraint, from shyness, or from partisanship with her mother, or from uncertainty about her own position, she would not let him retrieve his mistake, and he found himself considering how she was to be pro-

pitiated, instead of having her, as he expected, under his control.

The carriage rolled through the streets, over the bridge, past the gay shops, and amidst streams of people, and none dreamt that it was a link in a romance. Annie kept her gaze on the window, with the same expression; but it was uncertain whether her eye noted what it saw, for she seemed to start from a reverie, when the carriage suddenly stopped.

"We get out here, Annie," said her father.

The footman opened the carriage-door, and Annie alighted in Great Stanhope Street. Servants were awaiting their arrival, and gathered round; but she accompanied her father in, without looking either at them or the house.

Marble busts stood in the hall, and the interior beyond was reached through an archway, opening a staircase. This was richly carpeted, and guarded by a gilt ballustrade, while light descended from the roof, and toned the oil-painting on the walls,

and a figure of Apollo in a niche. But all seemed unheeded by Annie, as she accompanied her father to the drawing-room, which on every side presented gems of art, mirrors, and lustres, satin and velvet and gold, and elastic sofas, while the carpet sank beneath the tread.

"Do you like this, Annie?" asked Mr. Blandford.

"It is very handsome," answered Annie, without raising her eyes.

He took her along a corridor, and they entered a small room, draped with delicate silk. The window was of coloured glass, and admitted a soft light, which harmonized with the decoration of the walls.

"This is your boudoir," he said. "No one is to enter here but by your invitation. There are your books"—he pointed to a collection of standard works, elegantly bound—"and there your desk. This will supply you with pocket-money—" and he presented her a well-filled purse—"and you can come to me for more when you require it."

"Thank you, papa."

"I have something more to say, and then I shall leave you to rest yourself. To-morrow you will be joined by Miss Balcombe. Your stay together in Paris has made you good friends, I hope."

"I hope so, papa."

"You mean me to understand that you like her."

"Certainly."

"I am glad of that. Jessie Balcombe is highly accomplished, and will finish your education while she partly acts as your chaperon—that is, she will be your companion wherever you go—ride with you, walk with you, and visit with you."

"I understand, papa."

"You must remember that she will so far supply the place of your mother." Here Mr. Blandford smiled. "A young mother, I own—perhaps I ought to say an elder sister, for there are only some eight years between you."

"I shall have my mamma's care, too, I presume," said Annie, still looking down.

"Why, no, that is our difficulty," said Mr. Blandford, in his most silvery tone. "We won't enter on this subject now, but the fact is, there seems to be a flaw in your mother's marriage, and the law will require us to live apart in future. But this will not affect you, and you have only to make yourself happy. Miss Balcombe will be here in the morning, and go with you to the shops, when you must procure an outfit suitable to our new position, and without regard to expense. Please your own taste, and buy what you like."

"Very well, papa."

"I think I have no more to say, now. You have dined to-day, and I dine out, but I shall tell you all our house arrangements in the morning, at breakfast."

He stepped to the corridor, where a servant was in attendance, and bade the man send Miss Blandford's maid. The young woman was waiting, and appeared in a moment.

"There is your young lady, Burton, and you will devote yourself to her," said Mr.

Blandford; and he quitted the room, leaving them together.

"She is very quiet," he thought, as he walked along the corridor, his face betraying disappointment; "but I have kept her too much under. She shall have more swing in future."

Meanwhile, Annie sat down, and seemed to forget the presence of her attendant, who, standing by the door, scanned her unnoted. Suddenly, Annie looked up, and caught her eye. It dropped directly; but not before the young lady observed its expression.

"I should like to be shown to my room," Annie said.

"Yes, miss."

And the handmaid led her to a prettily furnished chamber on the same floor, and opening to a dressing-room. Annie saw herself reflected in a cheval-glass as she entered.

"There are tapers and matches here, I see, and my bag," said Annie, seating herself on a sofa; "so I think I can dismiss you for to-night."

"Won't you take any tea, miss?"

"No, I only want rest."

"Shall I not come and do your hair, miss?"

"Not to-night. But I can ring if I want you."

"Certainly, miss."

She ventured another glance at the young lady, and withdrew, but lingered to listen outside, and thus heard Annie lock the door.

"She's a sly one," muttered the girl, and walked away.

CHAPTER V.

ANNIE'S BEDROOM.

Mr. Blandford returned home late. Under the influence of society, a good dinner, and excellent wine, he had got over his moodiness, and was full of schemes for the future, promising everything he wished. A new marriage might give him a son, who would preserve the entail of his inheritance, and continue the family name, while Annie, by quietly surrendering her mother, placed him in a position to carry out the projected match between her and Charles Harrifield. This alliance would secure the estate to his descendants in any case, at the same time that it served another object; while, on the other hand, Annie's adhesion would shield

him from censure in the world, when the newspapers announced the annulment of his own marriage. He saw, moreover, a source of influence in her beauty and the charm of her manner, which would attract to his mansion persons who might otherwise stand aloof, and would thus strengthen his new fortunes. Nor were his feelings towards her wholly worldly; for, in satisfying his pride, she enlarged his affection, and he determined to spare no pains to arouse the same feeling in her.

In this mood he prepared a surprise for her in the morning. The groom was ordered to attend with a horse, bought for her use, and which Mr. Blandford intended she should be led to admire from the window, and then learn it was her own. He entered the room before the breakfast-hour, in order to be there first, and thus prevent a premature discovery. A glance into the street showed him the groom and palfrey in waiting, and he smiled at the thought of the pleasure she would express; for he believed the indifference she mani-

fested on the previous night, perhaps natural at the moment, would now have subsided. He began to wish she would come, but the time passed without her appearing, and remembering her proneness to loiter, he ordered the butler to seek Miss Blandford's maid, and tell her to announce breakfast. There was now some whispering in the passage, and the maid entered the room.

"Miss Blandford has locked her bedroom door, sir," she said.

"Well, can't you knock?" replied her master, carelessly.

"I have knocked several times, sir—quite loud; and she hasn't answered."

Mr. Blandford looked up. Something in the girl's face threw a shadow on his own, and he rose from his chair.

"I'll call her myself," he said, quietly.

The girl followed him up the stairs and down the corridor, and they reached the bedroom door. Meanwhile, a rumour spread through the house, and the other servants became alert, and peered round corners, in expectation of some event. Mr. Blandford

paused at the bedroom door. Then he gave a smart knock, and called out "Annie," listening for a response. But not a sound was heard. He rattled the door, with no better result; and now a horrid suspicion seized his imagination; he fancied that Annie, feeling the passing events more deeply than he supposed, had committed suicide. The thought nerved his frame with the strength of Samson: he flung himself on the door, and burst it open.

Hastily he entered, and scanned the chamber, while the lady's maid, seeming to catch his fear, hurried to the dressing-room. Both apartments were empty; Annie had disappeared.

"The bed hasn't been slept in, sir," remarked the lady's maid.

Mr. Blandford's eye fell on a sheet of paper on the toilette-table, and he snatched it up, and read these words:—

"*I shall lock the bedroom-door to prevent my absence being discovered, and leave the key in the drawing-room.*"

"Here is something more, sir," said the

housemaid, drawing his attention to a small packet.

He tore it open, and found the purse he had given Annie the day before. It was encircled by a memorandum.

"This purse contains three five-pound notes, and five sovereigns."

He knew the sum—the exact amount he had put in the purse; and she meant him to understand—as he did—that his money was spurned.

Thus did an instant dash his schemes, and scatter his hopes to the winds. Annie was not secured, as he had thought; and the attitude she assumed foreshadowed the construction that would be put on his proceedings by the world, unless she returned to his protection. He feared, indeed, that an effect might be produced at once, through the gossip of the servants, and he sought to prevent this scandal by making light of the elopement.

"I see by Miss Blandford's note that she found it lonely after I went out last night," he said to his attendant, "so she returned

to my other house. Perhaps, she spoke to somebody before she left. Tell the housekeeper to inquire, and let the porter fetch me a hansom."

The handmaid hastened to obey, and Mr. Blandford returned to the breakfast-room, muttering as he went, "So young and so deep—a woman already. But she shall find that I can deal with women!"

CHAPTER VI.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

Mrs. Blandford passed a miserable night. Unlike her husband, she was not beguiled by prosperity, nor absorbed by ambitious projects, and no dream of the future lightened her present wretchedness. She had long dreaded this blow, for without conceiving the precise shape it would take, her mind had a presentiment of it in shadow, and felt that it would come. Mr. Ravel had now told her both the law and the effect: and she knew her marriage was invalid, though the decree had yet to be pronounced. She was no longer a wife: wife she had never been, in the eye of the law, and she learnt at the same moment that she must cease to be a mother.

Her anguish could not be told in words; for to maternal sorrow and sense of wrong, the feeling of bereavement added the distraction of despair. Her mind lost itself in this whirl. Thoughts rose and faded, or gave place to a flood of recollections, which were less ideas than agonies; for each inflicted a pang. She felt abased and degraded, and saw herself an object of scorn, which converted even her child into a reproach. Thus she seemed to stand in the world without a single tie.

She had flung herself on her knees, with her arms on the bed, and her head buried between them, intending to pray—to seek consolation—perhaps redress, from a power greater than man. We forget the Invisible in our strength; it seems nothing, and we see help only in physical means—in connections, or money, or our own action. But there are occasions when the physical snaps—when we have no faith in muscle or sinew or even gold, and only the Invisible promises succour. Thus it happened to Mrs. Blandford. But so completely was she prostrated,

that she could not retain even this purpose, and as she knelt down, her mind fell into its first confusion.

So she passed hour on hour, and took no heed of time, and hardly varied her posture. But she underwent a change insensibly. Her sobs grew less frequent, her tears ran dry, and, though her sufferings continued, the paroxysm abated. And now she heard a rustling on the stairs; a light step approached; and somebody tried the door.

"Mamma," said a low voice.

Mrs. Blandford flew to the door, and admitted Annie, who fell into her arms.

Her face was so colourless, that Mrs. Blandford thought she had fainted, but she was reassured by her voice.

"I am well again now, dear," she said, kissing the quivering face of her mother. "I got frightened. Some men in the street seized me, and I ran myself out of breath to escape."

"Were you in the streets alone, at this hour?"

"Yes. I stole out of papa's house, to come to you."

The mother clutched her arm.

"How did you get in here?" she said, amazedly.

"Papa laid down his latch-key when he came for me yesterday, and I took it up. I guessed nothing of what he intended, but I knew I couldn't resist him, and that the best way was to appear to acquiesce in his arrangements, and then act as I could; I thought the key might be useful to me, as it has been."

"Oh, Annie! what will he say to this?"

"Never mind, mamma. I have left him for ever. I have come to be with you, if you will have me. If you won't"—she paused, with a determined look—"then I will go out in the world by myself."

"My sweet child—my brave Annie." The mother clasped her to her bosom, and held her a moment. "It seems now that I could almost be reconciled to it if you were with me. But this he refuses. The lawyer told me last night you were to stay with

your father, and that his settlement on me was conditional on my never seeking you."

"You are to have a good settlement?"

"Yes: more than I desire."

"And do you love this better than me, mamma?"

"Annie! Annie!"

Annie took her hand in both her own.

"I know, dear. You count it nothing—and as nothing let it be. Look, mamma. You have sixty pounds a-year of your own; and this is enough for you to live upon. I can support myself. Let us take no money from him; but go away, and be together."

The boldness of the proposal seemed to stun Mrs. Blandford.

"Suppose he should follow us, Annie?" she said, after a moment.

"We must take care to leave no trace, mamma. That is why I let myself in, instead of knocking at the door. Thus the servants won't know of my being here, and I will slip out in the morning before they are up, and engage somebody to come for my boxes. They have been left downstairs,

as papa told Mary he would send for them in the morning. Now we will take down your large trunk, which we can easily carry empty, and then put all your things in it, and it will seem a part of my luggage, and be taken away with it. Then you go out, as if for a walk, and I will meet you in the turning by Kennington Church."

"This bewilders me, Annie." And the poor lady pressed her hand on her forehead. "Where can we go out of your father's reach?"

"I can take a lodging, mamma, and then we will consult a lawyer, and see what is to be done. Surely we may be protected, at least. He can have no authority over me, if he divorces you."

She had now mastered her excitement, and spoke so calmly that her manner infected her mother. It shook the belief in Mr. Blandford's power, which was almost a part of her religion.

"I fancy it is a proctor we should see, Annie," she said. "I once knew a Dr. Chowler, who lived somewhere in Doctors'

Commons. Perhaps, we might find him out."

"We will try in the morning," replied Annie. "Let us now pack up your things."

All was done, as she suggested. They carried the empty trunk downstairs, where they put into it Mrs. Blandford's clothes and valuables, and writing Annie's name on the top, left it with the other luggage. Annie then persuaded her mother to lie down, and, soothed by each other, they both obtained a little sleep. The April morning looked in at the window, and called Annie up, when she noiselessly descended the stairs, and quitted the house, taking her mother's purse to meet her present needs.

CHAPTER VII.

DOCTORS' COMMONS.

ANNIE's character bore some such relation to her father's as that of the tortoise to the hare—only it was the tortoise that was disposed to loiter, and the hare was as alert as swift. One could never be certain that Annie would be to time: she seemed to linger and dawdle for the sake of the thing; yet she contrived to keep up the tortoise credit, and would save the train by half a minute. Mr. Blandford knew it was a nice point whether she would get clear off before he could intervene. He guessed that she would first go to her mother, and he waited only to give some directions to the lady's maid, and then sprang into a hansom, and made

for the Clapham Road. The ride afforded him time to form his plans, and he reached the house in a mood to act with discretion. The cab attracted the housemaid, as he drove up, and she hastened to open the door.

"What time did Miss Blandford get home last night?" he said, with assumed indifference, as he was stepping in.

"Miss Blandford, sir!" echoed the housemaid; "she didn't come back, after going with you, sir!"

"Are you sure of that?" rejoined Mr. Blandford, with an incredulous smile, while he scanned the girl's face.

"Quite sure. She couldn't come, you know, sir, without my being aware of it. The man has been for her things, but he didn't say a word about Miss Blandford."

"You surely didn't give up her luggage to anybody?" returned Mr. Blandford, gravely, but without losing his temper.

Mr. Blandford's soft manner had depressing tones, which awed his family and house-

hold, and it now rather flustered Mary, but she stood her ground.

"The man brought a paper from Miss Blandford, sir," she answered. "I think I've got it in my pocket. Yes, here it is, sir."

Mr. Blandford took the proffered scrap, which ran thus—

"MARY, give the bearer my boxes.

"ANNIE BLANDFORD."

"Was this all he brought? No letter or message for your mistress?"

"None, sir. I showed my mistress the paper, and she said the boxes were to go."

"And where is your mistress now?—in the drawing-room?"

"She has just gone out, sir."

"Only just gone!" smiled Mr. Blandford. "How long is that?"

"Not two minutes ago, sir. She went towards the park, and can't be out of sight."

The girl ran down the garden and looked

up the road from the gate, and Mr. Blandford followed.

"I can see mistress, sir;" she said. "There, by the church!"

"Half-a-crown if you catch that lady," cried Mr. Blandford to the cabman, jumping in.

And the cab flew.

Mrs. Blandford turned the corner at this instant, expecting to find Annie, but Annie had not appeared, and the church-clock shewed that it was but just the time they had appointed. A thousand apprehensions now seized Mrs. Blandford, and suggested the very incident that had occurred, the arrival of her husband in pursuit: so she hurried towards the Brixton-road without any object, but half trusting that she might there meet Annie, and escape this danger. And she nearly ran against Annie as she rounded the churchyard, where the young girl was coming leisurely along, unconscious of the least occasion for haste.

"I am so glad you are here, Annie," cried her mother. "Your father is sure to follow

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you as soon as he discovers your absence, and he must know it by this time."

"Before this, mamma, but we shall soon be out of his reach. I have taken a very quiet lodging, where we can stay unnoticed till we arrange some plan—only we must first see the proctor you spoke of. Where is Doctors' Commons?"

"I don't know exactly, except that it is somewhere in the city. But should we go there now, Annie?" And Mrs. Blandford looked timidly round. "I am so afraid of his coming."

"Let us get into this omnibus, then. It is going to the city, and you will be better satisfied to have this business over."

She did not wait for a reply, but held up her parasol to the driver, who instantly drew up, and she and her mother took their seats in the omnibus. Mrs. Blandford, however, had been sighted by her husband, just as she was turning into Brixton road, and as he was prevented by a bar from driving down the lane, he jumped out, ordering the cab to go round the other side of the church,

by the highroad, while he passed down the lane on foot. But he reached the corner too late: Mrs. Blandford had disappeared.

"Did you notice a lady come round here just now?" he asked of a passing policeman.

"Not half a minute ago, sir," replied the constable. "Met a young woman here."

"Ha!—where are they now?"

"They're in that 'bus, sir." And he pointed to an omnibus, rolling through Kennington gate.

Mr. Blandford darted to the cab, which had just appeared.

"Keep that omnibus in sight—not too close," he said to the driver, and sprang in.

It might attract a crowd if he took his wife and daughter out of the omnibus, so he determined not to appear till the fitting moment when he could act with effect, and, meanwhile, he could watch their movements, and ascertain if they had any definite plan.

The fugitives pursued their way unsuspicious of his vicinity, though Mrs. Blandford trembled through the minute's stoppage at

the "Elephant," and shrank out of view while they threaded Blackfriars Bridge and the hill of Lud. The omnibus drew up at the right of St. Paul's, and here the two ladies alighted, Annie glancing up at the edifice, and taking in the solemn vestibule, the towers, and soaring dome. The pile seemed to stand in the midst of the city like a conscience—*a little smoked.*

The conductor pointed to a turning as the entrance to Doctors' Commons, and they bent their steps to the spot.

Their approach was watched by a man at the corner, having his apparel encumbered by an apron, which, though it might seem purposeless, had a deep meaning, being intended to intimate that dirty work was done in that locality. It is true the application would have been more apparent had the apron been on the right horse, the proctors. But the man in question knew whom it symbolled, whatever might be the impression of the public.

"Want a proctor, ma'am?" he asked of Mrs. Blandford, as the ladies came up.

Annie drew her mother on.

"Who are you looking for?" asked he of the apron, pursuing.

Annie whispered her mother, and they kept on their way, followed by their interrogator, and presently, in fear of a kindred apparition, who appeared in their front. This individual they vainly sought to escape by crossing the street, for he was too used to such stratagems, and making a simultaneous movement, he cut off advance, just as their first assailant came up on their flank.

"Who do you want?" once more demanded the first man.

"It ain't no use looking about, ma'am," cried the other. "It's all altered from what it was."

Annie had seized Mrs. Blandford's wrist, and now made a dash between the twain, leaving No. 1 behind, and trying to round No. 2. But he kept by her side.

"They've been here before," shouted No. 1, in a sort of stage confidence to his colleague. And he gave up the chase.

No. 2, however, was more persistent, and

contrived to gain Annie's ear. "It can't be a license, miss?" he said, in an insinuating tone, the absence of a gentleman almost affording him an answer. "It must be probate, though you ain't in black."

This address amused Annie, in spite of her dejection, and she glanced at the man's face, which was of homely mould, but looked honest—though with a touch of comicality withal; one side presenting a sunken cheek, which marked some fifty years, while the fellow-cheek, puffed out by a quid of tobacco, exhibited more than the plumpness of youth.

"Do you know where Dr. Chowler lives?" asked Annie.

"I am his man, miss," was the reply. "If you come along o' me, you'll be all right."

"We had better go with him," Annie said to her mother.

Mrs. Blandford assented, and they walked down the crooked way under his guidance. It was a recess in the city, between the marts of Cannon Street and the slums of

Blackfriars—Mammon at one end, and misery at the other. An occasional van passed through, and woke a rumble in the chambers of the prim buildings, like scandal in the ears of dowagers. Doctors' Commons being dedicated to the doctoring of fractured vows, dubious births, and bruised wills, the tenements formed a moral lazarhouse, in charge of proctors and solicitors, the only doctors in such case. The rate of fees varied with the nature of the operation. A lover's oath was taken for sixpence, which the experience of the place affirmed to be as much as it was worth; a license to wed was then attainable on easy terms: but a license to unwed cost money—and oaths, too!

The labyrinth was threaded by folk on their way to business, and by others on their way to destiny—and by some, alas, who had reached destiny already. You met the expectant bridegroom, with beaming eye and face, and the dishonoured husband, drooping his diminished head. And, now and then, you ran against a lady veiled—not with innocence.

But Annie and her mother cared for none of these things; their thoughts were absorbed by their own errand, and they followed their guide, with hardly a look round till he led them into a doorway.

"This is Doctor Chowler's, miss," he said. And with an acknowledgment of Annie's gratuity, he ushered the two ladies into an office.

Mr. Blandford had, in the meanwhile, been blocked on Ludgate Hill, just as his cab was up with the omnibus, and they were cut asunder. He suddenly remembered the vicinity of Doctors' Commons, and this suggested to him that his wife and daughter were on their way to a proctor's, whereupon he jumped out of the cab, and made forward on foot, soon overtaking the omnibus, and then ascertaining they were no longer within.

"Didn't you bring two ladies from Kennington Church?" he asked of the conductor.

"Yes, sir."

"And they got out at Doctors' Commons?"

"Yes."

Mr. Blandford hurried back to the corner, and met porter No. 1, whom he instantly questioned; and learnt all he knew of the two ladies.

"Here's the man coming who tended 'em," he added. "I'll just ask him where they're gone, and take you there."

The other porter came up as he spoke.

"Who did you recommend the two ladies to, Touton?" asked his mate.

"That's my business," replied Touton, eyeing Mr. Blandford.

"And it happens to be mine, too," Mr. Blandford observed, with a smile. "Just take me where you have left them."

"*I'll* take you, sir, if he'll say where it is," interposed the first porter, asserting his claim to the job.

"Stop a bit," said Touton. "How do we know it's the right party?"

"I have no doubt of that," answered Mr. Blandford.

His manner did not reassure Touton, who reflected that Doctors' Commons was deli-

cate ground for ladies, and that his interrogator might be engaged on some mission of observation.

"Then you're the gentleman they're expecting, I daresay, sir?" he remarked.

"Expecting!" thought Mr. Blandford. "Whom can they expect?" But he repressed his surprise, and said "Just so."

"Well, come along o' me, sir."

The other porter objected, but Touton elbowed him aside, and he allowed them to move off, expending his resentment in a grumble.

Touton led Mr. Blandford into the heart of the region—if such a place could be said to have a heart.

"Here we are, sir," he said, stopping. "This way."

"That will do, thank you," answered Mr. Blandford, without entering the doorway.

"Very well, sir—very well," returned Touton, pocketing the tendered coin. And he walked away, murmuring "No, it ain't your game to go inside; not at all." And

he chuckled to the great derangement of the quid in his plump cheek.

Nor did he misconceive Mr. Blandford's intention, though ignorant of his motive, and though his suspicions of him were of a vague character and without form.

Mr. Blandford knew it would be a mistake to obtrude on a consultation between his wife and a proctor, and might come to be mentioned in court, or otherwise impede his proceedings; and besides, every purpose would be served by his waiting outside. There she would be encountered by himself alone, and there he would bring her schemes to an end.

Annie and Mrs. Blandford on the other hand, thought they were safe when they entered Dr. Chowler's office. Here they found themselves in front of a sort of counter, which formed an intrenchment round a high desk and stool, where watch and ward were kept by a clerk. The apartment was Dr. Chowler's swearing-room, and, hearing the door open, the clerk seized a Testament, under the supposition that some

bridegroom elect was coming to be sworn, when the rustle of garments caused him to look round.

"I wish to see Doctor Chowler," said Mrs. Blandford, presenting her card.

The clerk took the card, glanced at the name, and at the two ladies, and then passed to an inner room, whence he soon reappeared, and invited them to enter.

"I will stay here, mamma," said Annie, shrinking from the first opening of so delicate an interview.

Mrs. Blandford understood her scruple, and, though she felt the want of her support, assented, entering the inner room alone.

The clerk gave Annie a chair, and she sat down, and seemed now first to feel the weight of their errand. Her thoughts had been confused, hitherto, for she had been brooding on the misery of her mother, and harassed by apprehension of her father, while she tried to shape a course of action. But here it came home to her that the marriage was now virtually in court—that it was before one who could say whether it

was valid, or not, and that he was actually pronouncing the words which would either secure her mother's position or take it away. And she realised the whole import of the issue, knowing that the annulment of the marriage would not only brand her mother, but bastardise herself. This it was, that, in spite of her quiet and affectionate nature, so inflamed her against her father, and now made the moments seem hours, as she felt their burden. Such moments visit most of us at some period of life; to many they come more than once, and their bitterness is often greater than the worst they can bring. But it could not be so in Annie's case. The result, according as the marriage stood or fell, would secure her an honourable position or leave her without a name; and much as she suffered in apprehension, she shrank from the termination of her suspense.

The same dread seized Mrs. Blandford, as she found herself confronting Dr. Chowler, a tall, grizzled man, who sat with his head a little on one side, as if he kept it at

half-cock. This gave him a knowing look, and Dr. Chowler *was* knowing.

"How d'ye do, madam?" he said to Mrs. Blandford—he always addressed a lady as "madam," and it must be confessed that his knowledge of ladies, as represented by his clients, was almost confined to "madams."

He placed a chair for Mrs. Blandford, and his tone became more friendly, as he continued, "It is long since we met—some twenty years, I think!"

"Eighteen years—I last saw you just after my marriage," answered Mrs. Blandford, with a slight blush. "I was afraid you might not remember my married name."

"Oh, perfectly—perfectly! I knew your sis— your husband, you remember."

"It is on this painful subject I have come to consult you," stammered Mrs. Blandford.

"Ah! you refer to the recent decision, I presume. It will be a sad matter to many, and—and—but what did you wish to know about it?"

"I wish to ask if my marriage can be sustained."

Dr. Chowler looked at her pale face and colourless lips, and his eyes dropped. He was a worldly man, wrapped in himself and his own, and scarcely admitting a scruple in the pursuit of gain, but, now and then, he did feel little impulses of good-nature, and he was sorry for Mrs. Blandford.

"The marriage has stood for eighteen years," he said; "have you any children?"

"A daughter."

"Your private fortune was small, I believe?"

"Only sixty pounds a year!"

"And do you know what is Mr. Blandford's income?"

"He has just succeeded to a property which raises his income to about six thousand a year."

"Come, come, this will not be so bad," said Dr. Chowler, cheerfully. "You have a strong case for a handsome settlement."

"Then, the marriage—"

"We must give it up, madam—give it up

We'll make our fight, if it ever comes to one, on the settlement."

Dr. Chowler spoke lightly, almost gaily, and intended his tone to have an effect, but his words, which no tone could modify, deprived Mrs. Blandford of both speech and breath. She made an effort to collect herself, but her thoughts could only turn to Annie.

"I should like my daughter to come in," she said faintly. "She is in the other room."

Dr. Chowler touched a spring on his table, and the sound brought in the clerk, who was directed to introduce Annie, and she presently appeared. There was a little ceremony of presentation, and Annie sat down.

A moment's silence followed, and prepared Annie for the announcement which her mother, as soon as she found voice, forced herself to make.

"I have sad intelligence for you, Annie. Dr. Chowler gives me to understand that the marriage is invalid."

Annie felt a choking sensation, and tears

rose in her eyes—not more in sorrow than anger. But she made no remark—only pressed her mother's hand.

"Anyhow, I feel sure that I shall obtain a suitable provision for both your mamma and yourself," observed Dr. Chowler.

"We shall not trouble you on that point, sir," replied Annie, coldly.

"My daughter means that her father proposes this," explained Mrs. Blandford.

"Indeed! You know, then, for certain, that he intends to proceed for the annulment of the marriage."

"Mr. Ravel, his solicitor, told me that was his intention, and mentioned the settlement he would make upon me."

"So far, well," resumed the proctor. "He acknowledges the claim to a settlement, and the only question is the amount. What does he propose?"

"He offers me five hundred a year and a residence, and my daughter is to have the advantages of his establishment, but"—and now Mrs. Blandford's voice broke down—"she is to be separated from me."

The emotion with which she spoke infected Annie, who here interposed, speaking with visible excitement—"And we reject these terms, sir—we reject all terms."

"Ah! we are apt to give way to our feelings in such cases," said Dr. Chowler, slightly varying the cock of his head.

"It is not only a matter of feeling, but of principle," rejoined Annie; "and we have fully weighed it. It isn't as if we had no resource. Mamma has enough to live upon, and I can get money by teaching."

"This is all very romantic," smiled Dr. Chowler, "but we must remember the substantial. Your mamma is to be handsomely provided for, and you are to be placed in a good position—a position, let me say, you are made to adorn. Teaching is a poor exchange for such advantages."

"I am afraid it will be too hard for you, Annie," said her mother tenderly.

"Dear mamma, you know I am prepared for it," answered Annie, with the same tenderness; "and it is only of yourself I would have you think. At the same time, your

submitting will not affect my decision, though I shall be reconciled to loneliness, if you are in a situation that makes you happier."

"That could not be apart from you," her mother replied softly, and with tears. "Let it be as you will."

"You hear mamma's wish, sir," said Annie, looking up at Dr. Chowler. "Perhaps, now you know our resolution, you can assist me in my object."

We have heard of the fascination of the Areopagi, when Phrenice unveiled her bosom, and Annie could produce a kindred impression by unveiling her eyes. The effect on her face was transforming; her bloom seemed to deepen, and her features to become illumined, so transparent was their reflection of soul. Dr. Chowler was discerning for a patriarch; he had been disposed to treat her as a pretty child before, but now recognized one of the Graces.

And Dr. Chowler's practice trained him to appreciate such discoveries, inculcating the principle that he should take every woman

in her humour, which made it easier to finally bring her round to reason—as if a woman were not always reasonable! "Give them plenty of line," he would say, "and you're sure to land them at last." Indeed he considered that a lady developed into a sort of inverted Marah in his hands: she came into his office like a lion, and went out like a lamb. He now thought Annie was in a passion: he saw that she governed her mother; and he conceived that, in their present mood, they both would be deaf to counsel: so he suddenly reflected that Annie might work out her vagary, while she innocently fulfilled a purpose contemplated by his wife.

"Well, we may get you a trial," he said cheerily. "What can you teach?"

"Music and French. I have been a year in Paris, and my accent is thought good."

"Well, madam, we must indulge this young lady," Dr. Chowler said to Mrs. Blandford, smiling the while. "Let me take down your address. Somebody must communicate for you with Mr. Ravel, and

it is better that I should not appear at present. Have I your authority to instruct a solicitor?"

"Certainly."

"Then we will see what is to be done, both on your behalf and my young friend's here; and I shall make my report in a few days."

They bade him good morning, and passed out, when they were met by Touton.

"You didn't expect a gentleman after you here, did you, ma'am?" he asked of Mrs. Blandford—"because there's one been lookin' for you!"

"A gentleman!" echoed Mrs. Blandford. And she added to Annie—"It must be your father."

"We expected no one," said Annie to Touton, "nor has anyone a right to follow us."

"Then don't go that way, miss," replied Touton. "I've led him a dance down there, so that he may meet you coming out of a office where you ain't been in. You follow me, if you please."

He took the other direction, through Blackfriars, and thus brought them to Bridge Street.

"Now, you just get in a vehicle, and go off, ma'am," he said to Mrs. Blandford. And he disappeared before they could look round.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LODGINGS.

Annie had taken apartments in Chester Street, a turning off Kennington Lane, where they arrived unmolested, and without meeting any one they knew. The house stood at the bottom of a garden, and, though it afforded scant accommodation, was all they sought as a refuge. They would have time here to mature their plans, and Annie thought of these continually, with an eager desire to be at work. But she lacked the countenance of friends, Mrs. Blandford having passed her London life in seclusion, and having no circle of intimates, and Annie had to learn that nothing could be done without introduction.

Not that she moved in the business at this time. She and her mother were too apprehensive of falling into the hands of Mr. Blandford, to take active measures at present, and they only ventured out at dusk, leaving the teaching project to be perfected by Dr. Chowler.

It cannot be denied that Annie had impressed the Doctor. Mrs. Blandford interested him as an old acquaintance, but this was a feeble influence, and he might have grown indifferent about the mother if he had not been charmed by the daughter.

Men are susceptible creatures, even in mature life; and yield to beauty the sympathy they refuse to tears. The Doctor, however, was of Protean mould, inconstant as the wind, and to be out of his sight was to be out of his mind; so, while Annie was building on his intervention, turning his promise over and over, conjuring up hopes, and encouraging dreams of success, Dr. Chowler had forgotten the whole affair. Annie became anxious, after two or three days; and began to count the hours and

then the moments; and a postman's knock sent her heart to her mouth. But the letter was not for her, nor for her mother; they received no news; and they both felt very dejected.

They might have heard no more of Dr. Chowler, only that he was reminded of their existence by two incidents—he received an answer to the communication his solicitor addressed to Mr. Ravel, and his wife again mentioned the subject of the teacher. And thereby—that is, on his wife's movement, hung a tale. Mrs. Chowler had discovered that a teacher was wanted by a neighbour, with whom she desired to scrape acquaintance; and it occurred to her, that this opened a way for introducing herself, if she could find a suitable person. Thus it came about that Dr. Chowler paid a visit to Chester Street.

He was rather discouraged by the locality, for his benevolence was much influenced by appearances being reserved for the well-to-do in the world; but the sorriest dwelling can be lit up by beauty; and he forgot

the surroundings, when he confronted Annie.

"Well, I have been very busy for you, madam," he said to Mrs. Blandford, "and for our young friend here, too." And he glanced at Annie, who smiled. "And I thought it better to come round and see you instead of writing; for we may require to consult on our arrangements."

"We are very sensible of your attention," answered Mrs. Blandford, gratefully; "and shall be guided entirely by your advice."

"Then let me first tell you about our law matters," resumed the proctor. "Ravel asserts that we are premature in moving, as Mr. Blandford has taken no step for the annulment of the marriage, and his proposal to you is consistent with a voluntary separation: at the same time, he insists that Miss Blandford shall return to her father."

"I won't be separated from mamma," said Annie, resolutely. "Does he ask for her to return?"

"My return is impossible, now I know that the marriage is invalid, dear," observed

Mrs. Blandford. "Yet I will make a compromise for your sake. Let them engage to leave the marriage as it is, and I will consent that you shall reside with your father, provided you are allowed to visit me when you please."

"You are thinking only of me, dear," said Annie, tenderly. And Mrs. Blandford returned her caress.

"I wish this arrangement could be made," rejoined Dr. Chowler; "but we must consider it out of the question; for I have privately learnt that the suit is determined upon, though proceedings are delayed to give Mr. Blandford the power to claim the custody of our young lady, here."

"And can he take me against my will?" asked Annie.

"I believe he will do in that respect whatever might and money can," answered Dr. Chowler. "But if you still entertain your romantic project—"

"Do not call it romantic," interrupted Annie: "I adopt it deliberately, and as a necessity. I know it involves trouble, and

some humiliation, but I should feel it a greater humiliation to be supported by—by my father. I could submit to what mamma proposed, to avoid a disturbance of the marriage, but you say this cannot be. Then, let me endeavour to support myself. Mamma is quite reconciled to it—are you not, dear?"

"I believe you can do anything with your mamma—or with any one else," said Dr. Chowler, gallantly. "I know you have prevailed over me, against my own judgment. And since we are to allow you to have your own way, what do mamma and you say to taking up your abode at Surbiton, where my residence is, and where Mrs. Chowler tells me there is an opening for a teacher? You can assume another name—say Staunton, if you think of no better, and at Surbiton you will be quite out of the way of discovery."

He addressed the proposal to Annie, and Annie's look expressed approval, but she left her mother to reply.

"The plan is just what we could wish,"

said Mrs. Blandford, after consulting her daughter's face. "And both Annie and I are much obliged by your thoughtfulness for us, Doctor. When would you recommend us to go to Surbiton?"

"At once, if possible. The sooner you are out of London the better. And, by the way, we shall make a secret of our law affairs, remember. I never speak of these things, even to Mrs. Chowler."

The ladies appreciated this assurance, though in so delicate a matter, they might have been better pleased with a tacit understanding, as the mention of secrecy implied a sort of taint. Dr. Chowler departed, however, without a suspicion of his lapse, and they then set about their preparations, which Annie contrived to complete at last. As she had only engaged the apartments for a week, they soon arranged with the landlady; the servant of the house brought a cab, and they drove off to the railway.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SOUTH-WESTERN RAILWAY.

The train was gathering for Southampton and the Overland Mail, and the waiting room was furnished with ladies, some standing in knots, others lolling on the couches, in watch and ward of light baggage, or talking low, or listlessly gazing from the window, wearied by these last ebbing moments with friends yet recoiling from their close—

> "When hands are met that dread to part,
> And heart is pressed to throbbing heart—"

for who knew whether they would ever again hear the voices then bidding farewell! Two or three gossiped away, betraying the sex's ruling passion, strong in breath; but the most spoke only at intervals, and with

long pauses; for here stood the bride, parting from mother and sisters, and taking her leap into life with a comparative stranger, away from home and every familiar face—the mother, returning to Calcutta and leaving her children behind, and the chaperon and her three maidens for the Indian market, the pale invalids for Egypt, and the officers' wives for Malta! And the bell rang. There was a hubbub of voices, and a shuffling of feet, and all disappeared.

Hardly had the room emptied when it was entered by Annie and her mother. They stood at the window and watched the departing throng, in which the women now mingled with officers in mufti, and soldiers in red, or with moustachioed civilians, some with hair dyed by Rowland, and some with skin dyed by Sol, and the tendernesses of the scene interested Mrs. Blandford. But, as she observed others, she grew afraid of observation herself, and they sat down, with their back to the open window, but sheltered by the blind, and thus waited the announcement of the next train.

There was a bench just outside, on the platform, and two gentlemen threw themselves upon it, while Annie and her mother were whispering within.

"There is Ravel advertising for a deuced pretty girl," said one of the gentlemen, as he glanced at a newspaper: "who can she be? Just listen to the description."

"No, thank you," replied the other. "You are such an authority about pretty girls, I'll take your word for her. Descriptions are a bore."

"You are coming to that state of mind, Harrifield, in which you'll vote everything a bore—even women."

"My dear fellow, I arrived at that happy condition long since—seven years ago, at least."

"On the marriage of Lady Clara, *that* gave you a sensation, I know, though you have never been capable of one since. And how you have lived through the interval is a caution."

"Lived? existed, you mean!"

"I thought living and existing were the same thing."

"They may be, for aught I know. I can't argue the point—arguing not being my forte."

"Then, listen to the account of this truant, and you may undertake a quest for her as an object in life." And he read from the newspaper as follows—

"Left her home, a young lady, seventeen years of age, very fair complexion, tinted cheeks, beautiful hazel eyes (often cast down), bright chestnut hair, falling in curls behind, and slight figure, very graceful in moving. Wore a beaver hat, with red feather, velvet mantle, grey cachemere dress, and Balmoral boots. Supposed to be in company with a lady of middle age, dressed in black silk, and wearing a veil. Whoever—"

"By Jove, I saw them on the platform!" cried his companion, interrupting the recital.

"On the platform!" said the other, springing up.

Annie also sprang up; for she had heard every word, and the reference to herself could not be doubted. Her first thought was to fly from the station, and Mrs. Bland-

ford caught her hand, as if to lead her out; but this recalled her courage, and she motioned her mother to remain. Meanwhile, the dialogue without continued.

"There are a dozen middle-aged ladies in sight," said the reader of the advertisement, "bless them, they're always in sight! and there are a baker's dozen of young ladies, but I don't see one that could be mistaken for this peri."

"Nobody could be mistaken for her—she is herself alone!" said his companion, languidly. "Such eyes! I shall never forget them—never, never, never!"

Annie half smiled now.

"If you didn't," exclaimed his friend, "you wouldn't be Charles Harrifield!"

It was the name of the presumptive heir to Mr. Blandford's estate, and Annie and her mother exchanged glances.

"I'll tell you a prime lark," continued the speaker. "Let us give a hint to that policeman that she is somewhere on the platform."

"I'll be hanged if you shall!"

"I'll be hanged if I don't," and he moved off.

"Come, Travers, I won't have this—now, by Jove—"

The voices passed out of hearing, and Annie and her mother were left to their reflections or their devices.

"What is to be done, Annie?" asked Mrs. Blandford, agitatedly.

"You must go to the train first, mamma, and I will follow," replied Annie. "Now, don't be alarmed, dear. We shall attract no notice if we separate; for I can change my appearance with the help of your veil; and the absence of the veil will avert attention from you."

She drew the veil from Mrs. Blandford's bonnet, as she spoke, and tied it round her own hat, at the same time removing the feather. Then she rolled up her tresses from behind, dropped the veil over her face, and turned her mantle inside out, thus transmuting the velvet into black silk.

"Now go, dear," she said to her mother. "Here is your ticket; get into a carriage at once, and be quite sure you will find me near when you alight at Surbiton."

Mrs. Blandford was not so confident, but she agreed to the arrangement, and made her way to the train, while Annie remained in the waiting-room. Here she was presently joined by two other ladies, who had hardly entered, when the room was visited by a policeman, under pretence of announcing the train, but who, as Annie saw, came to inspect their appearance. Annie quietly rose, and fell in with the stream on the platform, where she entered an empty carriage, and took the furthermost seat. But she was not destined to ride alone; for the last moment brought to the carriage Harrifield and Travers, who sprung in, as the engine gave its premonitory whistle. The train moved a few paces, and then suddenly stopped.

"A sensation!" cried Travers, after looking out. "They'll catch her now if she is in the train. A policeman is overhauling the carriages."

"Through your confounded meddling," said his companion.

"How do you know that I haven't done her a service. It is plain Ravel means her

no harm, and the terms of the advertisement suggest that she has been decoyed away by some schemer. Since you take it seriously—"

"Now don't enter into it. Spare me, and avoid being a bore, when you can."

Here a policeman presented himself at the open sash.

"Well, no sign of her?" asked Travers.

"Not in the train, sir, if that's her true description," replied the policeman, after a glance at Annie.

He jumped down, and the train moved off.

"I have lost a handsome reward, according to the advertisement," observed Travers. "Fancy anyone being rewarded by Ravel."

"Fancy anyone making a monkey of himself, out of pure mischief," said Harrifield.

"I am imperfectly developed, you know. The element comes to me from the first of my family, an ingenious ourang-outang."

Charles Harrifield made no reply. His attention had wandered to Annie, and he was speculating what sort of face might underlie the veil, which so masked her features. His own countenance could be plainly

seen. It was eminently handsome, but sicklied o'er with the pale hue of dissipation, a touch of bloom lingering, however, and seeming to deepen under the flash of his grey eyes. Annie turned her face to the window, as he looked round, and thus avoided his glances. The movement threw down her parasol, and she stooped to pick it up, but he had already caught it in his hands.

"Permit me," he said, and presented the parasol.

She inclined her head, but without turning round her face.

"I am afraid this window exposes you to a draught," pursued Harrifield. "Would you like it up?"

"Thank you: I am indifferent about it," replied Annie. "Have it as you please."

Her manner showed that she would not be drawn into conversation, and Harrifield gave it up, resigning himself to a speculation as to the affinity of her voice and figure with her unseen face. The voice was sweet, the figure perfect, but he had met these characteristics in very plain girls, (if girls *can* be plain); and

it was a suspicious circumstance that she kept down her veil. A pretty girl, he reflected, would naturally have her veil up. Nor was Annie content with mere occultation; she averted her head, whenever he raised his eyes, and thus evaded his adroitest glance.

"Marked with the small-pox, perhaps," he whispered to Travers.

"Not a hint of it in the description," replied Travers, his thoughts still running on Ravel's advertisement.

He caught up the newspaper, and read out —"*very fair complexion, tinted cheeks, beautiful hazel eyes.* What do you say to that?"

"Bosh!"

"Well, you saw her, and I didn't. If she is pock-marked—"

Annie, on hearing this charge, could hardly repress a start.

"She may go to Hong-Kong for me," broke in Harrifield; "only don't make a bore of her."

And he flung back, in a stern silence, whence all the efforts of Travers failed to draw him till the train arrived at Wimbledon.

There they alighted, and Annie was left alone in the carriage.

She remained still a moment, and then moved to the window next the platform, and looked out. Her veil was raised now, and she happened to present her face at the window just as Harrifield was passing. He uttered an exclamation, recognising the beauty of the advertisement; but the train was in motion, and bore Annie out of sight.

"Small-pox indeed!" she murmured.

It was now a short journey to Surbiton, and there she rejoined her mother, and they left the station together.

Surbiton, though eleven miles from London, forms one of the suburbs of the great city; the train bringing it within range, and the post including it in the London delivery. It is situated just out of the domain of fog and smoke, and is near neighbour to Hampton Court, and the parks of Bushey and Richmond, while its promenade is washed by the Thames. Hard by is the little town of Kingston, a pleasant market, and offering

the attractions of streets of shops. Such advantages have made Surbiton's fortune, and it has become the Tusculum of all Londoners who appreciate fine air, cheerful walks, pleasant drives, and the most genteel society.

A suburb passes through several stages before it attains the perfection of Surbiton. There is the settling stage, when the place consists of a few shops without customers, and two or three villas: then rises a church, erected by the landholder; and the place advances to the second stage; villas multiply, and shops begin to have business, a doctor appears, and a chemist makes up your prescriptions at a profit of five hundred per cent. This is the zenith of the first settlers, who ride the high horse, and call themselves "aristocracy." But the third stage introduces the vulgar, who, having the one thing needful, throw the "aristocracy" in the shade, and this illustrous body now only maintains its ascendancy by swagger.

The final development brings in the deluge, when the "aristocracy" is swept

away and every man becomes as good as another—and better, too! Such was the present condition of Surbiton.

Annie and her mother landed in this paradise like strays. They were poor, and they were unknown, and their sole reliance was Dr. Chowler, a best bower anchor of dubious fibre. The reflection saddened Mrs. Blandford, who had lost faith in anchors; but Annie felt the confidence of youth, and led her mother on, noting things as she proceeded, and coming to the conclusion that their lines had fallen in a pleasant place.

Thus it was with a smile she stopped before a cottage, and drew her mother's attention to a notification in the window of "apartments to let." The tenement presented a good appearance, though Annie rather objected to the door being occupied by a brass plate which intimated that the owner bore the name of Booles, and was by calling an "accountant." Nevertheless, she decided to knock, a measure which excited a stampede of feet within, but brought no one out, and,

after a pause, she repeated the summons. The second knock proved more successful, attracting to the door an untidy little girl, who invited them to enter, and introduced them to the parlour, and Mrs. Booles.

Mrs. Booles had performed a hasty toilet, but unfortunately overlooked the advantage of a wash, and thus left on her face two smuts, which, as ladies have not yet reverted to black patches, rather threw her out of gear. She was fat, fair, and forty, by her own reckoning, forty-eight according to the registry of her baptism. There was a similar discrepancy in the accounts of her parentage, somebody having been heard to say that her mother kept a mangle, whereas she claimed to come of "gentlefolks," and stated that she had been cast off by her family on account of her love for Booles—certainly an infatuation, since Booles, whatever his merits, was no Adonis, being in person podgy and of comic visage. Perhaps, an explanation of this story might be found in the marriage of one of her gossips, who, while in service as cook, won the

hand of her master, Major Noseworthy; for nobody heard of Mrs. Booles's gentility until Jane Jukes was thus elevated into kinship with Lord Noseworthy de Barnfield. Then it transpired that Mrs. B. possessed equally great connexions, and she announced herself to be a near relation of Lady Angelina de Vere, confidential lady's-maid to the Queen —a post unknown to court circles— and also cousin to the Earl of Swandown and Lord Buttermere: all sacrificed for a lord not in the peerage, her lord and master. She now assumed as many airs as her friend Mrs. Noseworthy, her friend, alas! no longer, though, to proclaim their former intimacy, she always spoke of her as "Jane." It is fair to add that her statements received no corroboration from Mr. Booles, who seemed a myth himself as regarded Surbiton, his business of accountant, a fine word for city clerk, carrying him off by the first train in the morning, and only permitting his return at night, while he devoted his Sundays to tilling the garden, and thus was never seen by his neighbours.

The stateliness of Mrs. Booles rather dashed Mrs. Blandford and Annie.

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit?" she asked, not choosing to recognize the object of "apartments." "Midge,"—she made a gesture to the untidy girl—"chairs!"

Midge seized a chair, but the chair, as often occurs in lodgings, was not intended to be seized, and incontinently fell to pieces.

"How is this?" frowned Mrs. Booles, aware that the chair had been a dummy for months. "Now don't begin telling stories. This comes of your constantly dragging chairs by the arm. Haven't I shown you, again and again, how a chair is placed for the Queen by Lady Angelina de Vere, her majesty's confidential lady's-maid—and I am sure you couldn't have a better pattern. *She* isn't above her duties, if you are." Here the speaker turned to Mrs. Blandford in explanation. "Lady Angelina de Vere is my cousin," she remarked, "and what *she* can do, I think I am quite reasonable in expecting from my servant, though not perhaps from

this young person, who is only a substitute."

Lady Angelina was a caution to the "substitute," and at mention of the name, she receded towards the door, moving backwards, as from the presence of Royalty, and thus came bump on little Bob Booles and Bill, who had crept up from the garden for a peep, and were toppled over by the collision. This provoked them to roar as gently as sucking-doves usually do, at the same time that one kicked, and the other struck out at Midge, who thereupon joined the choir of sweet voices.

Mrs. Booles proved equal to the emergency. "I'll give you something to cry for," she exclaimed, moving to the spot. "You take *that*" —*that* being a cuff to Bob—"and you *that*" —a cuff to Bill. "And you go and bawl somewhere else." Here she pushed the substitute into the passage, while the two urchins rushed to the back door, and were bolted out.

"I must ask you to overlook this," said Mrs. Booles to her visitors, on returning: "it has never happened before, and is entirely

owing to the substitute. I have no trouble when I have a regular servant. But then I am used to servants; for I had the management of twenty-eight at my uncle the Earl of Swandown's. Pray what can I do for you to-day?"

"We came about the apartments," replied Mrs. Blandford, "but—"

"You needn't fear being troubled with my children," urged Mrs. Booles, seeing her hesitate. "This is a thing that can never occur again."

"I don't positively object to children, if there is nothing else to complain of. Can I see the rooms?"

"The subtitute will show them," answered Mrs. Booles, above the business herself, in spite of the example of Lady Angelina. "Midge."

Midge responded in a dolorous voice, but did not appear till after a second call.

"Show these ladies the drawing-room, and front bed room," said Mrs. Booles, adding to Annie, "I am separated from my family, in consequence of my marriage with Mr. Booles,

who is looked down upon by them. Perhaps, they are right, and perhaps I was wrong, but I made my choice, and there's no going back—is there, ma'am?"

The question was addressed to Mrs. Blandford, who mournfully shook her head.

"It is what I tell Jane, ma'am," continued Mrs. Booles, "Jane being married to Major Noseworthy, living in a grand house here, and one of the patronesses of the Assembly if you please, though she was the Major's cook not so long ago. She's very uppish now, of course. But you are waiting to see the apartments."

"I think they would hardly suit us, mamma," observed Annie, who began to fear that Mrs. Booles was a little flighty—though Mrs. Booles's flights were by no means little.

"No: I fear we must decline," said Mrs. Blandford, "particularly as the children—"

"The children are as quiet as lambs," said Mrs. Booles.

Here Bob and Bill entered a protest by kicking on the back door, and accompanying

the performance with imitations of the trombone. This turned Mrs. Booles on Midge.

"Why don't you go and look after them? What do you stand staring there for?"

"I wasn't a starin', ma'am," whimpered Midge, who had been tugging her sleeves over her elbows. "I was a tidyin' myself."

Annie had reached the door by this time, and got it open.

"You'd better look at the rooms," cried Mrs. Booles, desperately; "I am sure you won't find such a place in Surbiton, if you wish to be genteel."

But Annie, who had no such wish, persisted in leading her mother out, whereupon Mrs. Booles banged the door on their backs.

There was a bill in the window of the next cottage, and they turned to apply there, surreptitiously watched by Mrs. Booles.

CHAPTER X.

THE BURIED LETTER.

Mrs. Blandford's knock brought to the door a tall, elderly woman, who was Mrs. Booles's mortal enemy. Not that Miss Cottle realised this position, for she never felt enmity to anybody, and she shrank from Mrs. Booles, whether as enemy or friend. Chance made them neighbours, but associates they could not be, and Mrs. Booles had found it impossible to knock up an intimacy. Water might as easily blend with fire as the decayed lady yoke with the pretender.

Wrinkled was Miss Cottle now, and her face sallow withal, but time had been when those cheeks bloomed, and those eyes sparkled. Miss Cottle neglected her hay at that

season, and the sunshine passed by. In the dreariness of middle age, the death of her parents reduced her to a small annuity, and she sank out of sight and mind. Her humble retreat was then never illumined by a visitor; no neighbour vouchsafed her a friendly look; and kindly greeting she never heard. She was in the world without seeming to be of it, nor would have been of it but for the golden link of her sympathies,—a link which neither solitude could rust, nor chagrin break in and steal. It showed itself in the little tendernesses she bestowed on children, and helps given out of her pittance to the poor, when her heart expected no response, nor found one. Only a faithful parrot admitted her to companionship, appreciated her gentleness, and returned her affection. So years passed till her life, under the weight of this seclusion, became a burden, and night found her longing for morning, and morning for night. Such was her condition when an unknown cousin bequeathed her a small legacy, and it came into her mind to furnish a cottage, and let apartments,

which would at least bring her in communion with her fellow creatures. The enterprise was started, but hitherto it had been a disappointment, and her heart throbbed nervously as she answered the inquiries of Mrs. Blandford.

The rooms, which had a cheerful appearance, and contrasted pleasantly with those of Mrs. Booles, won Mrs. Blandford's approval.

"What do you think, Annie?" she said: "can we manage here?"

"I think it is just the place we want, mamma," replied Annie.

Miss Cottle now looked at her younger visitor, and seemed unable to take her eyes from her face.

"You are so like a lady I once knew, that I could almost think you were herself—only she would be an old woman, if alive," she said, apologetically.

The words struck Mrs. Blandford. "May I ask where you knew this lady?" she said, after a pause.

"It was at Wormby, in Hampshire, many years ago."

"Then, she was my mother. My daughter is her very image."

"And is it possible you are the daughter of Louisa Aymer?"

"That was my mother's maiden name," said Mrs. Blandford.

Both she and her interrogator were silent a moment, while they bent a glance of interest on each other.

"I wonder if you ever heard her speak of me,—of Rachel Cottle!" Miss Cottle then said.

"Rachel Cottle, her early friend—often, often!" replied Mrs. Blandford, holding out her hand.

Instantly they were on the best footing, and there was no further questioning about the rooms, which were at once taken, and now seemed a home to Mrs. Blandford and Annie. Something, indeed, remained on Miss Cottle's mind. She feared objections to her parrot, and she conscientiously represented this drawback, confessing that Poll had a weakness for screaming. Poll confirmed the statement on the spot, and the

outbreak was certainly trying. But a formal introduction to Annie, blended with a judicious use of the epithets "naughty" and "pretty," smoothed down his feathers, and he concluded by telling Miss Cottle to put the kettle on, and they would all have tea.

"A very good suggestion, Poll," said Annie, laughing. "I see we shall be friends, after all."

Tea was provided, and engaged the two ladies, while Miss Cottle sent to the station for their luggage, and made other arrangements for their comfort. This she further promoted by her manner, at once friendly and unobtrusive, and made them forget the deficiencies of their last abode. And such a result was of moment to Mrs. Blandford; for she caught impressions from outward things, and felt little disagreeables, which Annie, fresh from the roughings of school and a long journey, hardly noticed. They both liked the rooms, and, through the forethought of their hostess, Mrs. Blandford missed nothing in comfort. Moreover, she

was relieved from her apprehension of being discovered by her husband, from which she could not free herself in town, and she was inspirited by finding a retreat with a friend of her mother's. The incident took her for the moment out of her sadness, and carried her back to the past, which, though it had not been without shadows, exercised through its memories a beneficial influence, by leading her away from the present. She was not naturally lachrymose, but her nerves had drooped under the mock courtesy of Mr. Blandford and the dread latterly of a repudiation of their marriage, and she yielded to her sorrow, because, in the seclusion of her life, she had no escape from it. And it was difficult to arouse her from this second nature, created by habit. Annie's companionship did something, but only on occasions, and in such a way as a gleam of sunshine falls on a pool, throwing a little brightness on the surface, but leaving the depth untouched.

Annie herself suffered, but she had brought her sorrow under control. She was too sensitive to be indifferent to the stigma

on her birth, or not to feel acutely that the wrongs of her mother were her own. The mere loss of position she might have borne lightly,—at least, with resignation; but she recoiled when it entailed a reproach. We have seen how she rebelled against the promoter of the change, though in violation of her most cherished feelings. It is true, Mr. Blandford had not trained her in love, but her disposition was so affectionate, and she so reverenced the ties of nature, that her awe of him had been blended with tenderness, which waited only encouragement to show itself. This was the frame of mind in which she came to England—no longer a child, and, though rather cowed by memories, asking herself what there was so terrible in his affability, and determined to be more to him than she had been hitherto. The resolution was strengthened—perhaps suggested, by the lady commissioned to convoy her home, after being her companion during her last month in Paris. Jessie Balcombe gave a glowing description of the indulgences she would receive from her

father, and he had not only prompted the communication, but, as has been shown, intended to fulfil it to the letter. Annie broke with the conditions. And now came that revulsion of feeling, which not merely estranged her from her father, but steeled her against his authority—brought her for the moment to think that she was released from the very bond of nature, and that she owed him neither obedience nor duty. And, choosing between her parents, she certainly belonged by equity to her mother.

The last few days had abated her sorrow, and if any bitterness remained, it only welled up at intervals, when she was alone, or lay awake at night. Youth stands in the world, like daisies in a field; it may be bent by storms, or trampled under foot; but it retains its elasticity, and, with light and air, again springs up. So Annie recovered her cheerfulness. Her character threw out its varied traits, and to her mother appeared perfection —a little shaded by daring, but in a feminine way. Ordinarily it was far from bearing this impress, however. Her na-

tural manner was retiring, and she required to be interested before she rose to vivacity, as she needed to be provoked to kindle into courage. She was like an instrument that a touch wakes from silence to music—music always harmonious, but not always responsive. For she might be played upon by a skilful performer, and at another time might reveal as little of her purposes as Hamlet when he discoursed of the recorder. Her temper was of the same mould. With a will of her own when driven, she was yielding when led, and this pliability left her still more open to deception.

It is rare that our blemishes are apparent to our own eyes—rare, indeed, in the heyday of youth, when we are surrounded by illusions, and more or less disposed to consider ourselves immaculate. Still, though Annie felt a sense of power in herself, and could then show a masculine decision, under a woman's grace, there were moments when this sense of power was wanting—when she felt conscious of weakness and saw her own defects. Not only could she

be timid—not only could she forget that she was beautiful, but after practising a little adroitness, or a little reservation, in pure self-defence, she would bring herself to see that she was far from being so perfect as she ought to be. This conclusion might, it is true, be due less to her judgment than her tenderness, which was readier to blame herself than others, but still it did arise, though the first provocation found her erring again.

Mrs. Blandford's train of thought led her this evening to speak of her mother, and Annie was deeply interested, as the subject was one on which Mrs. Blandford had hitherto been reserved and which she always seemed rather to shun.

"Miss Cottle says truly you are like your grandmamma, Annie—indeed, you are herself over again," she observed. "There was little resemblance to her in my sister and myself, but likenesses often recur in a new generation."

"I can't account for her leaving your sister all her fortune, mamma," replied Annie, musingly.

"My sister had all her affection, dear—that was the reason."

"I suppose it would have been different if grandpapa had lived," half-sighed Annie.

"I don't know. Her fortune came from her uncle, who brought her up, and he settled it on herself, on condition that she married your grandpapa, who was her cousin, and desperately in love with her. There was a whisper that she would have preferred somebody else; but then the fortune would have gone to your grandpapa. He was poor, but all he possessed he left to me, probably from a fear that I should otherwise be dependent on my sister. It is thus I get my sixty pounds a year."

"Never mind, dear," said Annie, taking her mother's hand: "that is enough."

"I mind it only on your account, Annie."

"I intend to get a fortune for myself," said Annie, playfully.

"I am afraid fortunes are not made by teaching," replied her mother, with a smile half-mournful.

Annie laughed—for her eyes lighted on the chimney-glass.

"Let my dear mamma be cheerful, and I shall have all I desire at present," she said. "And, after all, our happiness does not depend on money, you know."

"It will make me cheerful to see you so," said Mrs. Blandford. "And you shall not be without some relic of your grandmamma; for I will now give you the only thing of hers I possess."

She laid her hand on a small desk, which had been placed on a side-table, and was within reach. Annie took possession of it at once, rewarding her mother with a caress, while she expressed appreciation by word and look. They then talked on, Annie asking many questions about her grandmother, which were duly answered, and so they passed the evening till Mrs. Blandford, fatigued by the harass of the day, retired to her room.

Annie, as usual, loitered, and thus fell into meditation. She reviewed all Mrs. Blandford had said of her early days, and of her mother and sister, passing to the strange story of her marriage, and considering, for the hundredth time, what might be the effect of

this on her own destiny. Dark problem for such a searcher! But though she could not forecast the future, she might be better fitted to cope with difficulties than a more experienced aspirant. Her judgment was untried, but it was robust. She came to the contest as an unworked scholar to a task, exhibiting the same superiority over the worldling, as the fresh mind over that of the pedant. A month ago she was utterly ignorant of social doings; now she understood that life was a struggle, that her path in it would be tangled, and that she must take every step with deliberation. Under this inspiration she looked upon the stigma on her birth as a wrong she suffered from society, as well as her father; and there were moments—and the present was one—when it seemed to pit her against mankind.

Her mind turned back to her mother's present, which gave her a memento of her grandmother, and she mechanically looked through the compartments of the desk, taking out the contents—merely writing materials, and sweeping round her hand

within. To her surprise the lower panel seemed to yield, and she discovered that it formed a false bottom, kept down by a spring. This, which disuse had made rigid, she ultimately forced down, and raised the panel. Beneath appeared the expected cavity, and something more—an open letter, which dust showed to have rested there for years.

Turning the letter over, she found it addressed on the back, in the fashion ruling before envelopes. It was not till she thus ascertained who was its recipient that she thought of reading it, but then she conceived that this was not only justifiable, but a measure of prudence, since she must judge from its purport whether she should mention it to her mother. That her mother had no suspicion of its existence, nor of the secret recess, she felt sure, and the tenor of the letter confirmed this belief. The impression communicated to Annie was confusing, but it pointed to facts to which her mother had never alluded, and which she would hardly have suppressed if they had been known to her. And yet such a thing

might be! There was a possibility that they referred to an event which her mother wished to be forgotten, and which it would pain her to touch upon; and Annie resolved to spare her this distress by concealing her discovery. But the facts were also consistent with another conclusion. This she thought over and over, and the longer she considered it, the more it seemed to conform with the letter. At the same time, she saw that confirmation would be very difficult to acquire, inasmuch as she could not even make an inquiry without danger. She was like a miner burrowing with a Davy-lamp, and impeded by the darkness, yet afraid to raise the gauze from the luminous spark on account of the charged atmosphere. The uncertain glimmer of the letter showed her only shadows, but an attempt to get more light might, by exploding a buried scandal, destroy both her mother and herself. Still, she resolved to hold her lamp, and steal along as she could, hoping to come out at last; and, with this determination, she replaced the letter in the recess, locked the desk, and betook herself to rest.

CHAPTER XI.

DR. CHOWLER AT HOME.

A FORMAL note appointed ten o'clock in the morning for Annie to present herself at the villa of Mrs. Chowler. This residence bore the name of Mount St. Bernard, though it stood some distance from elevated ground; but, as the mountain would not come to the Chowlers, they, improving on Mahomet, nominally created a mountain for themselves. Nor could neighbouring domiciles quarrel with this proceeding, inasmuch as their own designations were quite as inappropriate; and even where this was not the case, their inmates were themselves Mount St. Bernards. Mrs. Chowler was pre-eminently one, soaring above her own sphere,

and aspiring to rank with mounts of icy altitude; and any one trying to climb into her domain not only found himself in a freezing atmosphere, but was liable to slide down the glacier quicker than he came up. In short, Mrs. Chowler held what she called "a position in the place," which meant that she had grasped the skirts of two or three people above herself, and maintained her ground by standing on the heads of those below. Not being among the early settlers, when everybody called on everybody, this "position" had cost her some finessing; for the people overhead held up their skirts, as Mrs. Chowler did her own, and it was as rare to find a skirt dangling as to catch a weasel asleep. But Mrs. Chowler possessed an eye for such things, and she kept it open. Her efforts were backed up by the activity of the Divorce-Court, which brought the Doctor a flood of business just at the time when it became desirable to get a husband for their daughter Arabella; wherefore, they left their sixty-pounds-a-year house, down a turning, and occupied one at a

hundred-a-year, in the front. By nature and habit a screw, Mrs. Chowler grudged the outlay, but recognised its necessity, and took comfort in the expectation that it would prove a good investment. Nevertheless, the family had to contribute something in its commons, while the cook was pledged to keep no fat-pot; and whatever could be done towards skinning a flint in housekeeping, Mrs. Chowler accomplished.

A larger house also imposed on Mrs. Chowler the necessity of weeding her acquaintances, and she took care that this should be done in a manner to admit of no mistake; for she paid a visit to each, and pronounced one to be too young for her book, another too old, and another too distant, delicately concealing their real disability—their being too small. The proceeding rather disconcerted Dr. Chowler, but he acknowledged that it was a thing out of his province, and only to be carried out by the nerve of a lady, which, by some perverted instinct, he considered to be made of brass. Mrs. Chowler reconstructed her circle by

bringing down bigger game. No sooner had a family settled in a large house, than she made a descent on them, announcing that she had come on a "begging expedition," but their faces had hardly time to lengthen when she relieved their minds by "begging" their acceptance of a box at the opera—the Doctor having always on hand an opera client, who kept his quiver full of boxes. The manœuvre was a great success, for only in one instance had she met a repulse—Mr. Mockright, the city broker and underwriter, having, as soon as she mentioned "begging expedition," exclaimed "I'll give five poun';" and then, instead of welcoming her smiling explanation of "box at the opera," roared out "I can buy a box, marm, if I want one, or twenty boxes." Mrs. Chowler's nerve might be of brass, but it shrivelled under this shock, at the same time she was cowed by the stuck-up attitude of Mrs. Mockright and her daughter Jane, who played lay figures during the reception, and she beat a hasty, not to say disordered retreat. But brass is a long-

suffering metal, and endures the hardest blows. Mrs. Chowler had, as she said, "an object to serve"—nothing less than to secure the heir of the Mockrights for her daughter Arabella; and she well put it to her husband that there was no saying what a mother wouldn't go through in such a case. So she caught at a new opening for netting her big neighbour.

"You think they'll be pleased at your taking them a governess, from merely hearing they wanted one," said Dr. Chowler, as they sat at breakfast. "It seems to me a bold step, now we come to the point."

Mrs. Chowler, who was middle-aged, with the hard features of that period, but jauntily got up, appeared to wince a little. "The task isn't a pleasant one," she said, "but we mustn't shrink from unpleasantness, when we have an object to serve."

"I am sure they are not worth the trouble—upstart people!" said her daughter, disdainfully.

Miss Chowler was a blooming young lady, but rather flashy and fleshy. She held

peculiar views about pronunciation, particularly in respect to the letters *a* and *e*, and this was supposed to give piquancy to her conversation.

"Hold your tongue, Arabella," returned her mother. "I won't have you speak of what you don't understand. You don't know my object."

Arabella knew it very well; wherefore she feigned unconsciousness.

"I have paved the way a little, by writing to Mrs. Mockright," Mrs. Chowler added to her husband, "and saying that I had heard she wanted a music and French governess for her charming daughters—so charming! and should do myself the pleasure to call this morning, and introduce one to her notice, etc. The vulgar creature hasn't sent any reply, but we can't expect her to understand etiquette."

"I don't know that *you* are strictly in etiquette," said the Doctor, dubiously.

"No, because you know nothing about it," returned Mrs. Chowler.

"Well," he rejoined, "you had better

get a private brougham from the hotel, and tell them the coachman must be in livery. These things tell."

"Papair is teaching his grandmother," put in Arabella.

"Your papa is very fond of that," said Mrs. Chowler, smiling, but in a conciliatory way. "The girl will be here about ten, I suppose?" she added, to her husband.

"I dare say she will, and you can drive her home, after you have seen the Mockrights, and just call in on her mother."

"Call on her mother!" almost shrieked Mrs. Chowler.

"Papair!" exclaimed Arabella.

"A person in a cottage—in apartments!" cried Mrs. Chowler.

Arabella went off in an explosion of laughter.

Dr. Chowler cocked his head. "I can tell you this lady might be called upon by the biggest people in Surbiton," he exclaimed.

"But the biggest people in Surbiton won't call upon her, nor the littlest either," said Mrs. Chowler. "You seem to forget that

you have a daughter, and that we have to maintain a position, and it is a likely thing that I would call on a governess's mother, even though she is so dreadfully interesting to my husband."

"Yes, I am interested about them both, for they—." The doctor stopped short, remembering that to say ladies were his clients, was to touch them with pitch, but he was always ready with a tarradiddle: "they are committed to my care by a departed friend, and, little as you think of them, they might ride in their carriage if they pleased."

"And, of course, they don't please," sneered Mrs. Chowler.

Arabella roared.

"Such stuff to impose on a man of the world!" pursued her mother. "I am ashamed of you, Chowler."

The doctor cocked his head to an alarming point. But it was time to start for the train, and he went off.

His exaltation of Annie decided his wife and daughter to take her down when she should appear. Not that they came to a

formal agreement on the point, but it was understood, and each had arranged her part when the servant ushered Annie in.

Annie had made little alteration in her dress, believing that she here ran no risk of recognition, so that she closely resembled the description in the advertisement.

Her pretty appearance rather disconcerted the two ladies, yet Mrs. Chowler barely acknowledged her bend on entering, and Arabella met it with a smirk.

"You are the young person who teaches?" said Mrs. Chowler.

"Yes," answered Annie, serenely.

Mrs. Chowler intended the designation of young person as a snub, and was a little confused by Annie's serenity.

"I didn't expect so young a person," she resumed. "I am afraid you will be too young for the—the place."

This was another thrust.

"You can't be more than nineteen," pursued Mrs. Chowler.

"I mustn't deceive you," said Annie. "I am only seventeen."

"Seventeen!" echoed Mrs. Chowler, superciliously, intimating that Annie *was* deceiving, or trying it on, at least, and Miss Chowler expressed the same sentiment by another smirk.

"I hope you will consider the chief point is my capacity," said Annie, deprecatingly.

"Your capacity has yet to be proved, you know," said Mrs. Chowler, with a withering smile, provoked by Annie's superiority to Arabella, and the impression she began to make on herself.

"That is true. What I seek is an opportunity of proving it, and I can only hope that I may succeed."

"Humph! Dr. Chowler says you profess to teach French with the Parisian accent."

"Yes."

"My daughter knows French, but I am not satisfied with her accent. Now, we all have some object, you know. I shall be putting myself in an embarrassing situation on your account this morning, and you may make a return by taking a little trouble with her on that point."

"Do not call it a trouble: I shall think it a pleasure."

"I see you have been educated in Paris by your manner," Mrs. Chowler resumed, now in better humour, "and if you could give Miss Chowler a little of this—of your style, you know—"

"Mammair!" interrupted Miss Chowler, indignant.

"I can't think that Miss Chowler's style admits of improvement by me," smiled Annie.

"Well, well, we won't speak of that now. I am glad you think her style good—only I fancy a *leetle* touch of the Parisian air might strike more. But I'll leave you both to talk French while I put on my things and the page goes for the carriage." And Mrs. Chowler quitted the room.

The talk in French was instantly begun by Annie, and by her continued and ended; for Arabella's French seemed to be very limited. Indeed, it was confined to *oui*, *non*, and *je ne comprend pas;* and Annie discovered that the young lady would require to be taught not only the accent, but the language.

"Do you like French?" said Annie, at last, resorting desperately to the vernacular.

"You *asc* such strange questions," replied Arabella, still on the take-down tack, and showing Annie that in English pronounciation at least she was perfect.

"How can I know anything of my pupils without asking questions?"

Arabella tittered. "And doesn't it make your pupils *laf* sometimes?"

"Yes, it does—sometimes," said Annie, archly.

Arabella was a girl with wits, in spite of her affectation, and felt the retort. "Ah! you are so clever!" she rejoined, colouring. "But I shall soon *katch* you up in French. I *haf* know it already."

"And you have now an opportunity of learning it thoroughly, which I hope you will profit by," said Mrs. Chowler, entering the room quite reconciled to Annie.

Mrs. Chowler was in full feather, with a long train, and rustling like a thicket in a breeze. The carriage was at the door, and she and Annie set off for the Mockrights!

CHAPTER XII.

A SURPRISE.

The mansion of the Mockrights fronted the river, and was nearly all window, which gave it the appearance of a private Crystal Palace, or shop retired from business. And the latter aspect represented the position of its master, when he entered its precincts. Business Mr. Mockright left in the city, and at Surbiton was let loose with nothing to do. He had come out of his strong box, as it were, and entered a condition in which he was like a fish out of water, but in which he often floundered the right side upwards, notwithstanding.

This particular morning found him for

once in his life pursuing business at Surbiton, a city holiday having afforded him an opportunity of making an appointment there touching the future of his elder daughter. It was the ambition of Mr. Mockright to enroll this young lady in the peerage, and an opening seemed to present itself through Charles Harrifield, the heir-presumptive to the earldom of Bramblecourt, whom, through the agency of Mr. Ravel, he had on divers occasions supplied with money. Mr. Ravel was ostensibly coming on a money errand to-day, but the real object of the appointment was that he might see Jane Mockright, in order to be in a position to speak of her to Harrifield from personal knowledge. Mr. Mockright, however, did not reveal this fact to his family, having no idea that the occasion was one on which a lady would desire to go through a process of preparation, so all were in their ordinary attire, when the footman introduced—not Mr. Ravel, but Mrs. Chowler and Annie.

Annie found herself in a large room, the

splendour whereof would have added a fifth thing to astonish Agur, the son of Jakeh, not only in respect to its quality, but its quantity, the marvel being in the stowage —how so much could be accommodated in the space. If the house looked a Crystal Palace outside, inside it was a Great Exhibition; and the upholsterer and decorator competed for notice with the artist and curiosity-dealer. Such a labyrinth of furniture, such mirrors of glass and steel, such gilding, pictures, and statuettes, seemed set out rather for customers than guests, and to have no relation to a household.

In this room the family had assembled, and one glance exhibited to Annie all its members. Mr. Mockright was surly and burly, like a bear; Mrs. Mockright starched and thin; their elder daughter, Jane, who was just ending her teens, and had a prim look, possessed a fair complexion and good hair; Ada, the younger, a bright face; and Alfred Mockright was a good-looking fellow of two-and-twenty, habited as a rowing man.

"How *do* you do, Mrs. Mockright? and Mr. Mockright! I am so fortunate to come when you are at home," said Mrs. Chowler, gushingly. "Young ladies!" here a bow and smile. "And you, sir!" to Mockright junior—"I hope *you* are well. I am sure you look a picture of manly health."

Mr. Mockright met this salutation by a nod, Mrs. Mockright by moving the joint of her neck, the young ladies by sitting bolt upright, and the rowing man by putting his hands in his pockets.

"Is this the party?" said Mr. Mockright, looking at Annie.

"Yes, this is—is—the person," stammered Mrs. Chowler, deprived of breath by the cold reception, and herself looking heated.

"She's too young—I thought there'd be something," observed Mrs. Mockright.

Annie glanced at Mr. Mockright.

"It's a young party we want," he growled. "I'll have no danged old women here."

"This individual can't know enough for us," snapped Mrs. Mockright.

"How do you know what she knows?" snarled Mr. Mockright.

"I can conscientiously say she's very accomplished," struck in Mrs. Chowler, rallying; "and she has had the advantage of finishing in Paris."

"I don't like French airs," sneered Mrs. Mockright.

"Hold your tongue!" exclaimed her husband. Mrs. Mockright drew herself up, but, to the delight of Mrs. Chowler, was silenced. "What I want, marm," continued Mockright, "is soon told. My girls—the Miss Mockrights here—are a little backward, that's it; but the principal thing is to get them on in music and singing. Now can the party do this?"

"Perhaps the young lady would sing a song," suggested Mockright junior.

Annie coloured, and then turned pale.

"Not, of course, if it is disagreeable to you," continued young Mockright, addressing her, and himself looking confused: "only I thought it would spare you any

debate, at the same time that it would afford us a gratification."

"Very well put," said Mr. Mockright. "We are all ready to hear you, miss."

"Now, Miss Staunton, you are to sing," said Mrs. Chowler. And she murmured, "Pray don't be hesitating."

"Is it your wish?" asked Annie of Mrs. Mockright.

The lady of the house was mollified by this deference, and condescended to nod assent.

Annie turned to the pianoforte, and young Mockright had thoughts of assisting her to the seat, but before he could make up his mind, she drew it out for herself. But she was now suddenly struck by a sense of humiliation, relaxing the tension she had put on her feelings, and almost overpowering her. Her fingers betrayed her agitation, prompting Mrs. Mockright to raise her eyebrows, and her elder daughter to smile, and Mrs. Chowler to grow hotter. It was only for an instant, however. Then the notes came from the instrument in a stream of

melody, but melody that was unnoted in the fusion with her voice—a sweet, natural voice, rising and falling and swelling, enchanting the ear with these words—

"Not for me the glaring morning,
More than it I love the light;
Mirrored by the stars, adorning
With its rays the summer night:
Sweet 'tis then to stand and dream,
'Neath the galaxy's soft gleam—
Making earth an Eden seem.

"Then, like hope unclouding sorrow,
Nature oft uplifts her veil,
And reveals a blissful morrow
Twinkling in those stars so pale.
Oh! sweet then to stand and mark
In the shadow—like the lark—
Heaven peering through the dark."

The music ceased, and there was a moment's pause.

"I'd give a hundred poun to have my daughters sing like that," Mr. Mockright then said.

"You had better leave the arrangement to me," murmured Mrs. Mockright apart. And she added aloud, "Lessons are now given very low."

"I hope you will think my terms no exception," said Annie, presenting a card.

The card was intercepted by Mr. Mockright.

"Never mind the terms, if you do the business," he observed.

"How generous!" exclaimed Mrs. Chowler, and she looked upward as if to call the attention of the ceiling.

"I only wish for the terms on the card," said Annie, in a deprecatory tone.

Mrs. Mockright made a grab at the card, and her arm came in contact with a bouquet which lay on the table, and pushed it over. The encircling string gave way, and scattered the flowers on the floor.

"There's a danged mess!" cried Mr. Mockright. "The nosegay I got for our dinner party to-night. Who'll put it together again?"

"Jane can do it," pleaded his wife, with a gesture to her elder daughter.

"Jane shan't touch it, nor you neither. I could do it better myself."

"The flowers are not injured," remarked Annie to Mrs. Mockright. "I can arrange

them in the French way if you would allow me."

"I wish you would," replied Mrs. Mockright.

Annie set about the task, while the master of the house remained silent. The lips of all thus sealed, converted the party into a quaker's meeting. The strain was too much for Mrs. Chowler, and she ventured an "ahem."

"What did you say, marm?" demanded Mr. Mockright, starting.

"I didn't speak, sir," answered Mrs. Chowler, apologetically. "I only cleared my throat." And she repeated the sound, "*ahem.*"

Here Annie produced the bouquet, very prettily restored.

"I am sure that's better than it was before," said Mrs. Mockright approvingly.

Jane curled her lip.

"I think that will do, sir," cried young Mockright to his father. "You won't beat *that.*"

"I'll put it in the thing at once, or it will be spoiled again," said Mr. Mockright.

And he placed the bouquet in a gold epergne on the sideboard.

"It does look superb now," exclaimed Mrs. Chowler, enraptured. "Where did you get such beautiful flowers, Mr. Mockright?"

"Out of my conservatory, marm. And there's more where they come from. I have got as fine a conservatory for the size of the house, as any nobleman, short of the Duke of Devonshire."

"Have you, indeed?"

"You can see for yourself, marm. Here it is, if you like to go in."

"Thanks!" exclaimed Mrs. Chowler, who thought this the tip-top way of saying thank you. "I should like it above all things."

He opened the glass folding-doors, and was leading her into the conservatory, when he remembered Annie.

"Would you like to see it?" he said.

"You are very good," smiled Annie. And she turned to the two young ladies, "Will you come?"

The elder Miss Mockright deemed this address an impertinence, and deigned no reply, but the younger rose, with a slight bend, and joined Annie, and they were followed by her brother.

"How magnificent!" exclaimed Mrs. Chowler, scanning the conservatory. Nor was the eulogy extravagant, for the structure of glass formed a stately pavilion, extending along the whole back of the house, and presented a blaze of blossom. "What a lovely place you have here, Mr. Mockright, and what it must have cost you!"

"I don't mind the cost, marm. If a thing is a matter o' money, I get it, and the cost doesn't signify if I have what I want."

Annie had stopped in the doorway of the conservatory, and now heard the page enter the door behind, and announce "Mr. Ravel."

Her ear thrilled at the name, and she seemed chained to the spot for an instant, but presently she glided into the conservatory, out of sight.

"Show 'em the flowers, Alfred," Mr. Mockright said apart to his son, on this

interruption, "and then take 'em through the other door into the drawing-room; I'll send your mother there, after a bit. But we must talk to this lawyer, first."

And he returned to the room, without looking at Mrs. Chowler or Annie.

Mr. Ravel had paid his respects to Mrs. and Miss Mockright, and been received with a nod and stare, and allowed to remain standing, while Mrs. Mockright lolled back, and Miss secluded herself in the newspaper.

Mr. Mockright now appeared. "How d'ye do, sir?" he said to Ravel, with a slight movement of his head. "This is Mrs. and Miss Mockright." Ravel again bowed to the two ladies, or rather to Mrs. Mockright, and to Jane's newspaper. "Has Mr. Harrifield come to town, yet?" continued Mr. Mockright — and Mr. Ravel noted that mother and daughter now pricked their ears.

"He arrived yesterday," Ravel answered, dropping his tone. And he and Mr. Mockright walked up the room, and conversed apart.

"Look here, mamma," said Miss Mockright. She pointed to an advertisement in the newspaper. "You might fancy it was intended for the—the governess—by the dress." Here she smiled; "the rest of the description is very romantic."

"Very like, however," replied her mother. "Apply to Mr. Ravel, too!"

Ravel overheard the remarks. "You are speaking of my advertisement!" he said. "May I venture to ask if you have seen anybody resembling the description in it?"

"Not resembling," sneered Miss Mockright; "the description is too flattering."

"As like as two peas," cried Mrs. Mockright. "But you can see her. She is in the conservatory."

Ravel sprang up. "I will avail myself of your kind permission," he said.

"This way, then," growled Mr. Mockright. And they all moved to the conservatory.

The party there had passed along towards the door, communicating with the drawing-room—Annie eager to elude Mr. Ravel.

"Positively it is past eleven," she said, looking at her watch. "I must go."

"Impossible, Miss Staunton," cried Mrs. Chowler, authoritatively. "You must wait to see Mrs. Mockright."

"It is most unfortunate, but I really can't, with what I have to do," replied Annie. "I am sure you will make my excuses to your mamma," she added to Ada Mockright.

"Can't you wait?" simpered Ada.

"She *must* wait," exclaimed Mrs. Chowler, as they entered the drawing-room.

"What must be, must be, Miss Staunton, you know," said Alfred, now actually offering Annie a chair; "so pray sit down, and be sociable."

Annie laughed. "I am sure you would excuse me, if you knew how important it is for me to go," she observed to Ada and Mrs. Chowler. "*Good* morning!" And she left the room before they could interpose.

"How bent on her own way!" muttered Mrs. Chowler, "I believe governesses are the most troublesome people in the world—next to servants."

Alfred had followed Annie to open the door, but she was already outside.

"How she skedaddled!" he said, coming back. "She was down the garden when I got to the door, and out on the road."

"Extraordinary proceeding!" growled Mrs. Chowler.

Here they were joined by the other Mockrights, accompanying Mr. Ravel.

"Why, where's the party?" bawled Mr. Mockright, looking round.

Mrs. Chowler reported Annie's departure.

"Well, if she couldn't wait, she couldn't!" said Mr. Mockright, composedly. "Time is money, and we have no right to hers till we pay her for it. But she will come to-morrow, I suppose, and begin?"

"Certainly, Mr. Mockright," replied Mrs. Chowler, with her best smile, a little marred by perspiration.

"May I ask the young lady's name?" said Ravel.

"Staunton;" answered Mrs. Chowler.

"Have you known her long, ma'am?"

"We have known the family for years,"

rejoined Mrs. Chowler, for once sinking herself in her husband.

"Then, it can't possibly be the same person," said Ravel, to Mr. Mockright.

There was little more said, but Mrs. Mockright softened to Mrs. Chowler, and the proctor's lady did not leave the house till she had caught hold of her skirt.

CHAPTER XIII.

PRIVATE INFORMATION.

Mr. Ravel concluded his business with Mr. Mockright, and returned to town, understanding his views about Charles Harrifield, and sensible that it would be to his own advantage to promote the coveted alliance. He had thus two bidders for the prospective peerage—the one offering Jane Mockright, with a heavy sum down; the other, Annie, with two thousand a year on a life. But the latter proposition he conceived to be prompted by a desire to avert investigation from Mr. Blandford's title to his estates, and Ravel's instinct led him to probe this mystery, in order to turn it to account. He was solicitor to both Mr. Blandford and Harri-

field, but, besides a leaning to right, his predilections attached him to the House of Bramblecourt, and he felt moreover, that a service to nobility would be more likely to put a feather in his cap than a service to Mr. Blandford. But his measures must be pursued in secret, and he decided to keep friendly with Mr. Blandford in the meanwhile, but to do nothing that would compromise the possible rights of Harrifield.

The task was difficult from the outset. To carry it out, he must keep his two clients from becoming personally acquainted, a condition that seemed impracticable; for they might not only meet in society, but any moment might bring them together under his own roof. Indeed, this very danger now impended; for on reaching his chambers, he found that Mr. Blandford had just called, and stated that he would return in a few minutes, and Harrifield had already made an appointment for the same time. Ravel instructed his chief clerk to prevent their coming in contact, by getting rid of Mr. Blandford, if possible; and success was to

be announced by a tap on the wainscot, while, on the other hand, two taps would intimate that the affair exceeded the clerk's grasp, and required the intervention of Ravel himself.

"Mr. Blandford is very hard to manage, you know, sir," observed the clerk.

"Stuff, Flam! use your wits," replied Ravel; "you use them on me often enough. Remember you are only to summon me, as a last resort." Here there was a knock at the office door, "I dare say that is Mr. Harrifield. If so bring him to me, and we may get through our business before Mr. Blandford comes back."

And he receded to his room, as the clerk opened the door to Harrifield and a companion, his inseparable, Travers.

"Punctual as a chronometer, Mr. Harrifield!" exclaimed Ravel, receiving the two gentlemen with a manner half friendly, half deferential, having regard to the possible Earl of the future. "Men of business might take a wrinkle from you on this point."

"Ay, you may give him credit for his vir-

tues, though you won't for a thousand pounds," observed Travers. "I must own he was always first at dinner when we were at Eton; and he keeps up the practice."

"We haven't come to dinner here," remarked Harrifield.

"The gods forbid!" exclaimed Travers.

"Well, perhaps I could make you comfortable, if you did me that honour—which some day I may aspire to," smiled Ravel. "I assure you, I know where to lay my hands on some tolerable wine; and as for eatables, lawyers and good cooks are never far asunder. But this in due season. You are no doubt anxious now to get a disagreeable business over, Mr. Harrifield, and I am dreadfully pressed this morning myself. Here is the assignment to Mr. Mockright, if you will look it over."

"Pray tell us first who is that young lady you are advertising," said Travers.

"She is a devilish handsome girl, whoever she is," remarked Harrifield; "and you should put that in the advertisement, which now hardly does her justice."

"Why!" cried Ravel, "you haven't surely—"

"We surely have, though," said Travers, interrupting him. "And she sold us as completely as ever I was sold in my life."

"Do you mean to say you have seen her?—been in her company?" asked Ravel.

"Before we answer any questions on the subject, I must know your object in pursuing her," replied Harrifield.

"That is easily explained," answered Ravel, with simulated frankness; "she has left her home, on some fancied grievance, and without understanding what she forfeits by the step, and I am employed by her father to ascertain that she hasn't fallen into bad hands."

"Well, I know where she is at this moment," said Travers. Ravel started in his seat. "As to the hands she is in, I can pronounce no opinion; but I will undertake that she'll slip out of them if they are not to her taste."

"Now listen to me, Ravel, and never mind Travers's swagger," observed Harrifield.

"Your object seems to be good, so I can have no objection to telling you that I believe we saw this young lady in a train on the South Western, but where she was going to, or where she may be now, we have no more notion than the man in the moon."

"Speak for yourself, Charlie, lad," said Travers, with a quiet smile, at the same time privately making a gesture to Ravel. "Your bounce won't get my secret out of me, I can tell you: so just look over your paper, and let us be off."

"Is it really necessary that I should read this rigmarole?" asked Harrifield of Ravel.

"Absolutely necessary."

Harrifield walked with the paper to the window.

"Keep one eye shut, and you will soon get through it," cried Travers.

Unobserved by Harrifield, he scribbled over a slip of paper, and pushed it to Ravel. The words were these:—

"The girl is at the Dolphin, at Southampton, where she will wait for the Havre packet, which sails to-morrow morning. I learnt

this from the guard, whom she instructed about her luggage. Not a word to Harrifield."

Harrifield turned round at this moment.

"There is my signature," he said, handing Ravel the legal document. "Now we may go, I presume."

Ravel was about to assent, when two taps on the wainscot struck him dumb. The signal announced that Mr. Blandford stopped the way.

"If you will excuse me a moment," he said, rallying, "I think there is still a paper unsigned. I will just ask Flam." And he slipped into the outer office.

There, plain enough, was Mr. Blandford, who had evidently taken up a position of blockade, being engaged in a deliberate scrutiny of the Law Almanac, spread in a frame over the mantelpiece.

"Mr. Blandford, I mustn't keep you here," said Ravel, apologetically. "Flam, just go and look for that paper in my pigeon-holes, and send *them*"—he nodded towards the two junior clerks—"on their outdoor work."

In a moment Flam was guarding the door in the inner room, and Ravel and Mr. Blandford had the outer office to themselves.

"As I had nothing particular to say, I told Mr. Flam I could wait here till you were disengaged," said Mr. Blandford. "You will guess what I have come about. Has anything transpired from the advertisement?"

"Yes," replied Ravel. "I think I have got a clue. From one quarter I heard that she was seen on the South Western; and this would have raised my suspicions about a person at Surbiton—a Miss Staunton, only I have since learnt positively where she is."

"You are admirable!" exclaimed Mr. Blandford. "Where has she hid herself?"

"At the Dolphin Hotel, Southampton, but she leaves there to-morrow for Havre."

Mr. Blandford's face retained its smile, but the fashion thereof altered. "This information is very precise—we might say *too* precise, unless you had it from a reliable quarter," he said.

"It was communicated to me by a friend,

who got it from the guard of the train," answered Ravel, a little distracted by a movement in the inner room.

"Still, it might be what is called a blind," said the smiling Blandford. "If she were on the South Western at all, she would more likely stop at some intermediate station, and you were probably right about the person at Surbiton." He considered a moment, while Ravel, expecting Harrifield and Travers to burst in, stood on thorns. "I shall go to Surbiton and make inquiries," Blandford resumed. "Can you go to Southampton?"

"You know I can do nothing without you, sir: indeed, it is doubtful whether even you can prevail, if Miss Blandford is obstinate."

"I thought our postponement of the divorce secured my authority over her."

"But I find she is more than seventeen years of age, and it is a question whether the law would support us under all the circumstances."

"I shall take the law in my own hands. You can go by the three o'clock express to Southampton, and telegraph me at the hotel

at Surbiton, whence I can run down by the mail, if my presence is required." Here there were sounds of wrangling in the inner room. "What noisy people you have in there. Flam told me it was a lady."

"There is a lady in the case," stammered Ravel, "but there are gentlemen, too. I must go and finish their business, if you will permit me; for there is not a minute to spare, if I am to take the three o'clock express."

"You haven't much margin, certainly. I will wait till you dispatch them, and we can drive to the station together."

As Mr. Blandford made this proposal, two taps on the wainscot again warned Ravel that Flam was in the last extremity. The faithful clerk, indeed, had been pushed from the first, Harrifield having pronounced waiting intolerable, and Travers being minded to bring Ravel back, and make him conclude their business before he attended to others.

"I assure you, sir," interposed Flam, "he won't be a minute, but I was obliged to call him out, because I couldn't quiet the party. And being a lady—"

"A lady!" exclaimed Travers. "*Wheaw!*"

"Well, no sir—oh, no!" And Flam smiled grimly. "A most respectable party—in fact, very averse to seeing gentlemen—a lady superior of a sisterhood, sir!"

"What do you think of that?" said Travers to Harrifield.

Harrifield appeared not to think of it at all. "I am deucedly bored," he said, with a yawn. "Let us break through."

"Impossible, sir—really, upon my word, gentlemen! Now don't, I beg. It will frighten the lady superior, I do assure you."

"My good fellow, lady superiors are not so easily frightened," rejoined Travers, "and they like a sensation, as well as lady inferiors. Now, do come from before the door, and let us out."

But Flam continued to beseech and protest, and then to speak against time, which he was still doing, when they were rejoined by Ravel.

"Sorry to have kept you, gentlemen," said the lawyer, "and I must ask pardon the more, as I find it was quite unnecessary; for the

other paper is already signed. I should have been back at once, only I was detained by a fussy fellow in the office."

"Fellow!" exclaimed Travers. "Why, Flam told us it was the lady superior of a sisterhood."

"Confound him!" laughed Ravel. "He lies like truth. I really must dismiss him, or he will hang me some day."

"At any rate, he will damn himself," observed Travers, "so pray give him a chance of escape by sending him about his business."

"The very way to damn him, judging his business by what we have just seen," said Harrifield, good-humouredly.

Flam took care to be out of sight as they passed through the office, and he feared no rebuke from Ravel, who looked in such cases to the result rather than the means. The lawyer, indeed, was well satisfied to be extricated from his dilemma, and hugged himself on his own adroitness with Mr. Blandford, whom he had managed to get out of the office just in time. He now

stayed to write a few letters, and give some instructions to Flam; and then started for Waterloo, to catch the Southampton express.

Meanwhile a hansom bore Harrifield and Travers, after several stoppages at shops, to the Albany, where Harrifield alighted, but Travers kept his seat.

"I am going to Waterloo," he said, bending down to his companion. "I told that dodger Ravel that the girl was at Southampton, and I will take you a bet that he sets off there by the express."

"You have never sent him away from his business on this fool's errand;" replied Harrifield.

"It will give him a sensation."

"I believe you want to hoax me into going back to caution him."

"You would be too late, as he has started by this time. Take you five to one on it."

Harrifield thought the joke had been carried too far, and turned away, leaving Travers to drive off. But Harrifield was too apathetic to be ruffled beyond a moment. He began to think that, after all,

it would be amusing to see Ravel hoaxed—only he must take precautions against appearing in that position himself, and so prevent Travers from having the laugh at him, while he was meditating a laugh at Ravel. Accordingly, he gave the proper directions, as he stepped into a cab.

"Now mind," he said, "I don't want to get out till the bell rings for the train to start. Just give me time to reach the platform."

If Harrifield desired to elude Travers, Travers took equal pains to escape the eye of Ravel, keeping in the background as soon as he ascertained that the lawyer was present. The bell rang at last; Ravel entered a carriage, and the train started. Then Ravel caught a glimpse of Travers, who waved his handkerchief, and a misgiving smote the lawyer. But he was now flying along at the rate of ten miles an hour, the express speed on an English railway.

Travers ran against Harrifield, as he left the platform.

"Ah! I knew you would come," he said, laughing. "Isn't it a sensation?"

CHAPTER XIV.

PURSUIT.

Annie Blandford found herself outside of the Mockright abode, with a feeling of relief, believing that she had escaped danger from Ravel by escaping his observation, and never dreaming that the incident would set her father on her track. Her morning's visits disposed her for favourable auguries, and altogether put her in good spirits. There had been some roughs, but there had also been smooths, and governessing promised to be not such slavery as novelists represented. Annie was too sensible, indeed, to expect it to be all play, but she looked forward to no bondage. She felt an interest in the work, the desire animating so many girls and so

many women to do something, and which we see run to seed in woman's rights' advocates, in Doctor Mary's and Miss So-and-So's. But in Annie the feeling had an envelop of delicacy. She ventured in the world like the sensitive plant, shrinking from its touch. She wished to pursue her vocation in the background, and be as little seen as the violet. This is the natural spirit of a woman—not seeking notoriety, but a vocation; not making her sex a platform, but aspiring to see it a ministry. She thought she could put her accomplishments to use, and make them a profit to others; and she walked along, building up achievements in this kind, and seeing herself, in imagination, the instructress of half Surbiton. There might be vanity in the dream, but there was nobleness too; and, looking at the selfishness of later life, it seems a pity that these aspirations of youth should not sometimes be fulfilled.

Suddenly Annie's way was blocked by Midge, Mrs. Booles's "substitute."

The little maid exhibited her usual dis-

array, being without a bonnet, and having her hair in a furze, and her sleeves tucked above her elbows.

"Please, Miss, I've give missis a warning," she said, curtseying.

"What, little Midge," smiled Annie. "And what was your warning about?"

"About leavin', miss. I went to her to better myself, and I only worsered myself."

"That was very disappointing. I suppose, from your giving warning, you still wish to better yourself?"

"That I do, miss. And begging your pardon, miss, you're such a kind lady, I thought I would ask you to speak for me to Miss Cottle, who wants a girl; and though I've never been a girl, I've been a substitute, you know, which seems all the same."

"Well, girls have to keep themselves neat, Midge, and that doesn't seem the rule with substitutes."

Midge dropped her head at this insinuation, but she said a word for the substitutes, nevertheless.

"It ain't no use where Bob and Bill is,

miss. I'm always a-tidying myself, and I'm always no betterer."

"You must be better, if you wish to be with Miss Cottle. But I will see what I can do for you—only don't come till you have quite left Mrs. Booles."

Midge did reverence for this grace, and Annie pursued her way, considering how she could equip her in an old morning dress, which she had to spare. So she reached home, where her mother was anxiously waiting her return.

"How have you got on, dear?" Mrs. Blandford asked, her face brightening as she saw the brightness of Annie's.

"Brilliantly," answered Annie. "We shall have to make Miss Cottle take a larger house, if I proceed as I have begun."

"So sanguine!" smiled Mrs. Blandford. "Well, hope is the property of youth, and I would have it be yours always."

"It can't be mine, if it is not yours, mamma, for I intend to share all my property with you."

"And my Annie's hopes are what I would share above everything."

They talked on, and Annie gave a cheerful account of her morning's receptions, but suppressed the incident with Mr. Ravel, considering that the danger was over, and that the mention of it would cause her mother needless alarm.

She went in the garden, after dinner. Here a high fence afforded seclusion, and she could stroll about without being overlooked. Her thoughts ran on the letter which she had found in the desk, and which involved such mystery, a mystery of which she could still conceive no solution but one that involved either a crime or a deception. What she learned from the letter was indeed but a hint, and her expansion of it would have excited a smile in others, yet she combined the hint with the circumstances, and they took an irresistible hold of her imagination. Once she wavered in her resolve of keeping it secret from her mother, but she remembered the objections, and adhered to her determination. No action could be taken in the matter at present. She might wish it otherwise: there might even be urgent reasons for proceeding,

but there was equal reason for remaining still. A little light would show her whether she should move in the affair, or let it drop; and how to acquire this gleam occupied all her thoughts.

Her meditation was interrupted by the rustle of a dress, and she turned round, and discovered Miss Cottle tying up a rose-tree.

"So you are your own gardener," said Annie.

"As far as I can be," replied Miss Cottle. "And who do you think taught me the art?"

"I give it up, for I shall never guess."

"Well, it was a friend about your age, and as like you as one rose is like another."

"Ah, I know now—my grandmamma."

"Yes."

"You were a great deal with her."

"We were inseparable at one time, but somebody interposed, and she became estranged from me."

"What a mischievous somebody!" said Annie, playfully; "a lover, I presume?"

"No indeed; but a designing woman."

"A woman! then old and grey, of course?"

"Neither, in appearance; for she was about the same age as myself; but she was both old and grey in deceit. She was your grandmamma's maid, and came to her in the height of our friendship. This she regarded with jealousy, and began to undermine at once, but I left the neighbourhood before she could produce more than a coldness, and your grandmamma and I parted friends."

"What was this woman's name?"

"Rhoda Pinkerton."

A little flush passed over Annie's face.

"What a smart name for a lady's maid!" she said. "It is as good as Lady Angelina de Vere, Mrs. Booles's model, and who by the way is a lady's maid, too—and a confidential one!"

Annie laughed, and Miss Cottle half-smiled, though she shook her head, a movement which her parrot, occupying a perch by the window, endorsed, by going in for a screaming fit. Annie put her fingers in her ears, and ran in-doors, while Miss Cottle scolded Polly, and with such effect that the sagacious bird was seized with remorse, and

acknowledged himself a "naughty Poll." He followed up this confession by his usual hospitable proposal of tea.

Annie rejoined her mother, and they conversed cheerfully, while each kept her fingers busy, one in hemming, and the other in knitting. Annie would like to have told her mother what she had just heard about Rhoda Pinkerton, and once or twice it came to the tip of her tongue, but she checked herself, fearing to awaken sad memories. The ground was all unknown to her, except as to there being something buried beneath. She felt therefore that she must rather lead her mother away from the past, than drag her back to it, since the first step might light she knew not where. Yet she had a belief that Rhoda Pinkerton was the key of the mystery. Did her mother know this woman, and how could the fact be ascertained, and all her mother knew elicited? Annie kept on talking with these puzzles in her mind. Thus they naturally prompted her words when Mrs. Blandford herself touched the chord.

"You have been chatting with Miss Cottle, haven't you?" Mrs. Blandford said.

"Only for a minute, mamma," replied Annie, colouring.

"Not of her early days, then?"

"Something about them. But I am afraid that subject is not one you like to speak of, dear, and so I won't bring it up."

"But Miss Cottle was before my time, you know—before my mother's marriage, indeed: and I only heard of her when she was lost sight of: therefore, she can recollect nothing in which I am concerned."

"Then, you didn't know the person she spoke of, I daresay."

"What was the name?"

"Rhoda Pinkerton," said Annie, glancing timidly at her mother's face, and changing colour herself, as she saw it pale. "Ah! now I have distressed you. Why did you question me, dear mamma?"

And she put her arm round her mother's neck.

"You haven't distressed me, dear; the name was a little surprise, that is all.

Rhoda was no friend of mine, whatever she may have been to Miss Cottle."

"Oh! Miss Cottle seems to have hated her, as far as she can hate anybody. She describes her as a malignant woman, who exercised a most pernicious influence over grandmamma."

"That is a very just report; but Miss Cottle doesn't know what mischief Rhoda worked eventually. For this bad woman could do with us as she liked, as she was your grandmamma's confidante, almost her master—and she seemed to have the same power over your father."

"How strange! One can hardly conceive anybody influencing *him*."

"It could be seen in this case. And I believe it was Rhoda who brought about his marriage with my sister, when he was paying his addresses to me, and thus caused all our misery." And the ready tears fell from Mrs. Blandford's eyes. Annie could only give her a sympathising caress; for she knew not what to say in the way of comfort. And Mrs. Blandford went on—"She was his foster-

sister, but this scarcely accounted to me for the interest he took in her, or her sway over him. It was this association that first brought him into our neighbourhood and then into our family—for she it was who introduced him under our roof."

Mrs. Blandford became silent, arresting her disclosures at the very point where they promised import, and so exciting Annie that in the whirl of the moment, she could not refrain from blurting out the question running in her mind—"*What has become of Rhoda, mamma?*"

"She married and left—went to live away from Wormsley, at Torquay," answered Mrs. Blandford, composedly, "and we heard little of her afterwards, though I believe she was in constant communication with my mother. But Rhoda and her husband and my mother are all dead now: that generation has passed away; and they can do us no more harm, Annie."

"Let us leave them in oblivion, then; and forgive me, mamma, for showing so much curiosity. I was wrong to let you dwell on

things that recall only sadness, but I shall be more careful for the future. Now will you take a walk with me in the garden?"

Mrs. Blandford consented, and Annie led the way out.

CHAPTER XV.

A BLOW.

Mr. Blandford, pursuant to his arrangement with Ravel, made his way to Surbiton, and took up his quarters at the hotel. Here he set inquiries on foot, and soon learnt tidings of his wife and daughter. Next morning he was joined by Ravel, who reported the failure of his expedition to Southampton, without divulging the fact of his having been hoaxed; and Mr. Blandford, on his part, did not mention what he had himself discovered. His disposition was so wary that he never revealed more of his affairs than seemed absolutely necessary; and having now conceived an independent plan of action, he allowed Ravel to depart with the

impression that he had heard nothing of the fugitives.

A week passed before his measures were matured. He had tried the effect of glitter on Annie, and failed, and he now sought to reach her through the intervention of others —proposing, first to use her mother in this way, and then Jessie Balcombe, whom he had made her companion in Paris. He felt that he could exercise his old ascendancy over Mrs. Blandford if they once met, and when he had induced her to return to his protection, he could persuade her to lure back Annie. Full of this project, he contrived to catch glimpses of Annie without being seen himself, and in this way becoming acquainted with her movements, was able to present himself at Miss Cottle's during one of her absences.

Mrs. Blandford uttered a cry when he was ushered into the room, though he wore his blandest smile.

"I am an unexpected visitor," he said, "but a friendly one, and, I hope, not unwelcome."

Mrs. Blandford found no voice to reply.

"You are delicate," he continued, "and this surprise has agitated you." He put his arm round her waist, and placed her in a chair. "Compose yourself, for I have come to console you, not to annoy."

"Thank you, thank you," answered his wife, with tears. "Indeed, it is long since you have spoken so kindly to me."

"Heaven knows my intentions towards you are as kind as circumstances will permit —and to Annie, too, ungrateful as she has proved herself. It is for you to decide whether I am to carry out those intentions, or whether we are all to be made miserable for life."

"I can never be anything but miserable."

"Now you are speaking from a foregone conclusion. You may be happy if you please—you may possess whatever money can buy, and liberty to do as you wish. Is it not childish, then, to indulge in unavailing regrets? Sentiment belongs to the past, and a woman prefers independence at your age."

"I can't argue the point with you,

Robert. What you say does not express my feelings, but neither can I express them myself. I wish Annie were here. She could speak for us both, I think, and justify us."

"Nothing can justify Annie, though I admit there is excuse for yourself. You acted under a misconception. Ravel spoke beyond his commission, and led you to apprehend that I meditated proceeding for a divorce."

"And do you not?" said Mrs. Blandford, eagerly. Then she drooped her head. "But this was too plain: it was your own statement to Annie."

"I certainly told Annie that it might be expedient to have the marriage annulled," replied Mr. Blandford, with unshaken self-possession, "but this was said thoughtlessly —said under the shock of discovering our position. Enough that I have taken no steps in the matter—that my present belief is that it is *not* expedient."

Mrs. Blandford caught his hand, and he left it in her clasp.

"What I propose is this," he continued.

"You know that we can't now live under the same roof!"

"No, no," she said, dropping her face on his arm.

"Well, I have taken a pretty retreat for you—and in this neighbourhood, too, at Walton, only a few miles distant. Annie can visit you there if you like—though her interests in life require that her home should be with me. Now what do you say—will you sacrifice yourself and her too? Will you consign her to a life of toil and penury, when she may take a brilliant position?"

"Oh! I wish she were here, I wish she were here!" exclaimed Mrs. Blandford, distractedly.

"Perhaps it is better that she is not; for I have a carriage at the door, and we may drive over to Walton, and see the place"—Mrs. Blandford looked frightened—"and then you can speak to her with more effect."

"But—but—"

"Now, don't be silly, Louisa," smiled Mr. Blandford. "You know very well we can be back before Annie returns."

"In that case I see no harm, certainly," replied Mrs. Blandford, at a loss what to say, and seeming, indeed, lost altogether.

She was soon equipped, and Mr. Blandford scarcely allowed her to afford a word of explanation to Miss Cottle, but hurried her to the door, where a post-chaise, which had followed him from the hotel, awaited their appearance. He helped her in, and took a seat by her side, when the carriage rolled off.

They had been gone about two hours before Annie came home.

"Your mamma has had a visitor—a gentleman," said Miss Cottle, as she entered the parlour, "and they have gone away together."

The news seemed to stun Annie.

"I hope nothing is wrong," Miss Cottle continued, seeing her discomposure. "Your mamma told me she would be back by the time you returned."

"She won't come back, Miss Cottle," said Annie, sitting down, and looking disconsolate.

Her distress infected her hostess, who, however, tried to calm her fears.

"We mustn't anticipate evil," she said. "A short time will disclose the truth, and it may be different from what you expect."

"I can tell what has happened," rejoined Annie. "Her visitor was my father, and he has induced her to go with him either by some threat or some deception. Did she appear frightened?"

"I fear she was agitated a little: at least she seemed in a flurry, and hardly to be aware of what she was doing."

"My poor mamma! I know the signs too well;" and there were tears in Annie's eyes.

"You must keep up your spirits, dear," said Miss Cottle, soothingly. "It is in favour of your mamma's return that she has taken nothing with her—at least, no clothes. The gentleman said she might want to write a note, and he carried away her desk."

"The desk!" exclaimed Annie, springing up, and looking round the room.

The desk had been observed by Mr. Blandford, while his wife was assuming her shawl and bonnet, and he imagined that it

contained her law papers, which would enable him to see what she had been doing, and the position of her case: so he snatched it up, under the pretence mentioned by Miss Cottle, and placed it in the carriage himself.

"It is gone!" said Annie, sinking in her chair again. "And the letter—he has the letter!"

And she buried her face in her hands.

CHAPTER XVI.

BUSHEY PARK.

Annie had returned home in low spirits. Already she had discovered that teaching had its troubles, and that they were hard to bear. What Dr. Johnson calls the "insolence of wealth" reigned at Surbiton—often insolence without the wealth, and it awarded consideration in the ratio of one's depth of pocket, whence not a grain fell to the teacher of music. Annie had to put up with the bounce of Mrs. Chowler, the snobbism of Mrs. Mockright, and the airs of all her pupils, while the servants caught the vulgar tone, and treated her with contempt. It was not her pride only that was wounded, but her kindly spirit, which these helots of

Mammon could not comprehend, and only met with rebuffs. And then there was the difficulty of concealing her dejection from her mother! Her heart was heavy, and she must appear cheerful, and pretend to be full of hope. This, it was, that imposed on her the greatest strain. But she kept bravely up, and in her spirit of abnegation, came home with a smile.

And her mother was gone! at the first pressure—perhaps on persuasion; and left her to struggle alone. Annie knew it was through weakness of character, but, in her present mood, the desertion seemed to betoken also lack of affection, and, for a moment, this impression raised a glow of resentment in her mind. But she possessed no feeling like her love for her mother, and it rallied directly, and suggested excuses.

She recalled their common habit of obedience to Mr. Blandford, and his power of control, and she began to doubt whether she might not herself have faltered if he had taken her so unawares. Thus her sympathies returned to their old channel,

ignoring herself and centering on her mother. All—and thoughts and feelings came in a torrent — passed through her mind in a minute; for, under great agitation, our emotions are as rapid as the changes of a dream; and at no time could Annie have trembled more to hear of her father's seizure of the desk, containing a document which, if it came to be scrutinized, might prove of grave consequence to both her mother and herself.

This new misfortune dissolved her in tears, communicating a sense of her loss to Miss Cottle, who, ignorant of what it might bode, found no way of expressing her sympathy, but by laying her hand caressingly on her shoulder.

"Have a good cry," she said, tenderly: "it will be better than talking." And she left the room.

Annie's tears needed no bidding, and Miss Cottle was right: she did feel the better for the indulgence. Her mind became calmer, and led her to conclusions she met undismayed; for her nature was so

buoyant, that she shook off tears almost as they came. She felt deeply where feeling was touched—in things engaging her sympathies, but she rose from trouble as from a passing wave, which submerged her indeed, but only for an instant. Thus she came to think less of the loss of the letter than the situation of her mother. But why should this cause her anxiety? They had always, indeed, lived in awe of her father; he ruled them as he pleased; and they had never dared to say him nay; but Annie began to think their thraldom was due less to the conduct of her father than the yielding character of her mother, haunted by the dread of repudiation; she considered her father cruel to break up their home, placing a brand on her mother, and bastardising herself—every remembrance of his design brought a flush to her cheek, but she never apprehended that he would, under any circumstances, subject them to personal violence. Hence she had no fear that her mother would be ill-used, or put absolutely under restraint. She saw only that her

father adhered to his intention of keeping them apart, and she conceived that this was for an ulterior object, which probably related to herself. Thus her mind gradually became calmed about her mother—not satisfied, but soothed. Not so as to herself, however. She felt that her father's next movement would be against her. Should she await the attack, or fly, while she could, to some obscurer place? A little reflection convinced her that she had better remain at Surbiton. There was a propriety in her residence under the roof of Miss Cottle, the early friend of her grandmother; she had, moreover, a sort of legitimate protector in Dr. Chowler, her mother's legal adviser; and, lastly, in Surbiton lay her means of livelihood. She wished that she could tell their whole trouble to Miss Cottle, but this involved a disclosure from which both her mother and herself shrank, and, in talking with their hostess, they had spoken merely of a family estrangement. Annie felt the harass of being environed by mystification, in addition to the apprehension of interference from her

father; but the latter feeling dominated, and this it was that found utterance when she rejoined her hostess.

"I can't conceive how my father traced us," she said. "I think he must have known we were here some days ago, or he wouldn't have been so prepared to take mamma away."

"I fear some blame attaches to me," answered Miss Cottle. "I ought to have mentioned that a person was loitering about here all the week. He came just at dusk, and I have seen him pass five or six times before the house, looking at the windows. He walked on the other side of the way, but I went to the post last night, while you were singing, and found him standing at the gate—only he hurried away directly."

"And was he the gentleman who came here to-day?"

"Oh, no! he was quite a young man: indeed, he looked like one of the boating people."

"Dressed in that style, then?"

"Exactly—straw hat, sailor's rough coat, and white trousers."

"Then he could be no one from my father, I should think."

"I declare, there he is!" exclaimed Miss Cottle, suddenly.

Annie glanced across the road, and saw young Mockright. He caught her eye, and nodded and smiled.

"That is Mr. Alfred Mockright," observed Annie, without acknowledging his recognition.

"He nodded to you," said Miss Cottle.

"I don't see nods from young men," answered Annie. "As a governess I must submit to rudeness from my own sex, but I am not under the same relations to the other."

This doctrine astonished Miss Cottle, accustomed to bend to every slight, but she expressed no dissent. "Now, isn't it a pity that such a pleasant looking young man needs to be taught this lesson," she said. "See how we are spoiled by money!"

Alfred walked as if his money were not sufficient ballast at this moment. His legs felt unscrewed, and he got by the house he

knew not how, for he understood the reason of Annie's blindness. The fact was, his wealth insured him thankfulness for small favours, and he had come to think a nod as good as a bow to a young lady: whence he naturally conceived that it would be appreciated by Annie. And now he walked off with his legs nowhere!

"You must dine with me to-day," said Miss Cottle, again laying her hand on Annie; "for the upset this morning prevented your mamma ordering anything. Now come into my room, and I will soon have dinner on the table."

"I think I must arrange to dine with you every day, now mamma has gone," replied Annie: "indeed, to live with you altogether; for I shall not have the means of keeping three rooms for myself."

"We can talk of that, by and bye."

But Annie would make a contract there and then, and it was agreed that she should board with Miss Cottle, and keep but one room, and that the other rooms should be let to any desirable applicant.

Annie was now more satisfied, and resumed her serene look, whatever the disquiet of her mind; nor would any gloom have rested there, could she have forgotten her mother. But, although reflection had dissipated her alarms on this point, she felt the separation, and could not extrude it from her thoughts. Her heart was large, and her mother possessed it all. The ties of nature had doubled in their case, and knit them closer, because both shrank from Mr. Blandford, and they thus had no stay but each other. So Annie's mind kept her mother in view. Her little tremour about herself did, indeed, rise occasionally, but only as a breath on the mirror, while the remembrance of her mother appeared like her own image. She pined to be again with her, sharing and soothing her sorrow, and taking comfort in her companionship; and she determined not to rest till they were again in communication.

A reverberating knock on the street door shattered her reverie, and the same moment brought in Miss Cottle in breathless haste. "A carriage has stopped," said the excited

spinster. "You see, your mamma has come back, after all."

Annie, who had turned very pale, shook her head.

"It isn't mamma," she whispered; "it is my father."

She clutched Miss Cottle's arm, and held her a moment. "Now let him in," she said, "I must go through the meeting as I can."

But she was spared the trial she expected, for the visitor introduced was not her father, but one of her pupils. It happened that, being Saturday, Mr. Mockright came home early, and was now driving his daughters to Bushey Park, to see the chestnuts in bloom. Suddenly he remembered their youthful teacher, and conceived the design of picking her up on the way. Mr. Mockright admired beauty, and he respected talent, and Annie's union of these gifts took his fancy. In his estimation, one of the pleasures of wealth was the power it gave of showing off to clever people, and parading them in his train, and as he looked upon everybody below

the aristocracy as equally snobs, and on all men poorer than himself as paupers, he thought it no more compromised him to ride with a music-teacher than with any other inhabitant of Surbiton. All were small fry to him, and his leviathan pastime was to pair with one of the smallest, in demonstration of his principles. Nor must it be concealed that, on this occasion, he acted also on an impulse of good nature, inspired by Annie's youth, and the conditions under which she was earning her livelihood.

So he signalled the coachman to stop, and the carriage drew up at Miss Cottle's door.

"One of you go in, and ask her if she would like a drive," he said to his daughters.

"Can't John ask her?" answered Jane, indicating the footman.

Mr. Mockright growled, frightening all within hearing.

"I will go, papa," said Ada, hastily.

She alighted, to Jane's relief, though that young lady affected unconcern, and assumed a sullen aspect, being, nevertheless, all the

time in terror of an outburst from her father. But this peril was averted by the unexpected appearance of Alfred.

"You here!" said Jane, brusquely. "I thought you were to row to Putney this afternoon."

Alfred looked a little confused. "I changed my mind, you see," he answered. And he added to his father—"Can I take in any message to Miss Staunton?"

"No, you can't," replied Mr. Mockright, gruffly; "there's no message. Ada has gone in to ask her if she would like a drive—that's all: and why the deuce you all make such a fuss about it I don't know."

Alfred thought the best way of avoiding a fuss was to make no reply, particularly as he highly approved of his father's motion, and thanked his stars that he had happened—of course by chance—to come that way, which threw him into such good company. Not that Mr. Mockright himself was all that could be wished at the moment, but his face had begun to clear, and Alfred's silence facilitated the process.

They were now rejoined by Ada, leading out Annie, and Alfred received a recognition from the latter, for which he did not omit to raise his hat, remembering the while, with a slight blush, his late remissness on this point. He waited till the two girls were seated, and then surprised Jane by mounting the box, and disposing himself beside the coachman.

"Are you going, Alfred?" cried Jane, in some spleen. "We shall be indeed a party!"

This observation afforded her father an opening for getting rid of his ire.

"You needn't be one if you don't like," he said. "You can get out, and walk home, and we'll go on without you."

Jane had no fancy for such an arrangement, and shrank back in the carriage, while a quiver shot through Annie and Ada, in sympathy with her panic. Mr. Mockright alone felt the better, and his broad chest expanded, as if he breathed more freely. So the carriage rolled in silence along the side of the river, through Kingston, and over the bridge, attracting attention by its stylish appearance, while, from

the cowed look of the party, it might have done duty for a hearse.

Thus they came to the park, and entered the avenue of chestnuts now in blossom, and presenting a magnificent appearance. The tall trees were in their court dress, as it were —the foliage breasted with bloom, and combining grandeur with beauty; and the long vistas, four in number, with the expanse of park, formed a spectacle that stirred Mr. Mockright's patriotism.

"I should like to see any foreign country that would beat this," he said, in a glow, "and all open to everybody, to the meanest of the people! Come, girls, we'll get out, if you like, and walk to the top."

The proposal was accepted by Annie and Ada, who promptly alighted, but Jane remained in a sulk in the carriage. Mr. Mockright took no notice of her contumacy; he was not vindictive, and looked upon her as a sort of worm, only to be trod upon when she came under his feet. Moreover, he was now carried away by the transports which seize a cockney at sight of turf and trees.

"What do you say to this, governess?" he demanded of Annie. "Now tell me candidly have they got anything to equal it in France?"

"No, sir," smiled Annie. "Trees don't flourish there, and those in the Bois de Boulogne and the Tuileries have neither breadth nor height."

The reply pleased Mr. Mockright, so did the smile, and he became friendly with Annie. She responded to his remarks, concurring in his encomiums of the different points of view, opened by the lines of trees; and so they came to Diana's fountain.

"Why haven't they got this playing?" Mr. Mockright demanded of Alfred.

"It seems to be out of order," answered Alfred.

"Out of order! it's going to rack. I should think they might keep it in repair, when it is only a matter of money."

"Perhaps, they are short of money, sir."

"Government short! then why don't they lay on more taxes? Taxes hurt no one—

we don't feel 'em; and what they bring in keeps the country going. Do you think we should be the people we are, without taxes? Look at England on the map of the world! look at her, I say."

"It wants a telescope," smiled Alfred.

"So it does," laughed Mr. Mockright. "And yet," he added, warming again, "Government neglects a fine piece of work like this!" And he pointed to the hideous structure: "isn't it a shame?"

He turned to Annie, who knew not what to reply, being a little frightened, but fortunately Mr. Mockright did not wait for an answer, passing as he spoke round the pool, to inspect the fountain on the other side.

Annie bent over the water; it was burnished by the sun, and reflected her image.

"Now I believe in Narcissus!" murmured Alfred, who had stolen to her side. "Any beholder of that reflection must fall in love with it."

"Wasn't the reflection Narcissus fell in love with his own?" asked Annie, archly, as she moved back.

"That is the story."

"And he was a man!" smiled Annie, pointing at the pool, from which her step backward had withdrawn her own shadow, leaving Alfred's in its place.

"You have turned the tables on me," rejoined Alfred, gaily. "But I overlooked myself, and Narcissus would have done the same, if he had seen you in the pool."

Annie knit her brow.

"Have I offended?" asked Alfred, with a deprecatory air.

Annie raised her eyes now, and they seemed to Alfred to flash, but not with anger; for he thought the radiance as soft as their hue.

"You are forgiven," she answered. And she turned to his sister.

"Now don't walk into the pool, Alfred," simpered Ada. "What are you thinking of?"

Alfred, who scarcely seemed to know, collected himself at this reminder, and was quite alert on the reappearance of Mr. Mockright. The millionaire still raved of the fountain,

leading the way, as he talked, to the carriage, which had followed them up the avenue, and now waited their approach. When they had taken their seats, the carriage drove off, and made a round towards Surbiton. Alfred resuming his place on the box, was thrown out of communication; Annie fell into conversation with Ada; and Mr. Mockright and Jane sat silent, not opening their lips till the carriage stopped at Miss Cottle's.

"I must thank you for this pleasant drive, sir," Annie then said, "and for your kind attention."

Again she said the right thing for Mr. Mockright, who despised thanks for gifts, considering them purchased with a price, "a matter o' money," but liked recognition of his favours, and he began to have a high opinion of Annie, who showed this appreciation without becoming a toady. He looked in her sweet face, thought of her youth and isolation, remembered their pleasant chat, and in a fit of affability, held out his big hand. The footman hardly believed his

eyes; Ada glanced over at Jane, and Jane herself stared and curled her lip.

"Good-bye," said Mr. Mockright, "I'm glad you've enjoyed it."

Alfred was in attendance, and Annie received the worship of the tall footman, but without being cognisant of it, as she only looked up to exchange adieus with Alfred. So she entered the cottage; the carriage drove off; and she found herself alone with Miss Cottle.

"I congratulate you, dear," said the old spinster with a loving kiss. "You have made a powerful friend, and can now have as many pupils as you like."

"I value the friend most," replied Annie; "but it is as you say, a piece of good fortune altogether."

"Quite so. And I have been fortunate, too. I have let the apartments while you were out, and they are taken by just such a person as we could wish."

"Indeed."

"Yes; a young lady—young, though some years older than ou· and she is very

pretty, too. I believe she is an artist; for she says she has come here to sketch. But I will go upstairs with you, and you shall hear all that passed."

And she accompanied Annie to her room.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANNIE FINDS A COMPANION.

Annie listened to Miss Cottle's recital, and asked one or two questions, which evinced interest, but she had no desire to come in contact with the new lodger. She had resigned punctilio in her relations of teacher, but not socially, and she shrank from making acquaintances in her present sphere. Her thoughts were only as to how she could pass in and out without encountering the stranger. She felt that this incident took away from the comfort of her residence with Miss Cottle, but it was one of those roughs she must expect, and after a moment's disquiet, she made up her mind to bear it lightly.

We are often led into such resolutions without being required to put them in practice; for, in looking forward, we are as likely to misapprehend our difficulties as to grasp them. Annie never dreamt that the new comer was an emissary from her father, no other, indeed, than her Paris companion, Jessie Balcombe. And a better agent Mr. Blandford could not have selected. Jessie, in her twenty-sixth year, still preserved the freshness of girlhood. She was, as Miss Cottle said, very pretty, though her prettiness depended a little on her complexion—and a good deal on her languishing black eyes and on eyelashes Walpole would have called a yard long. It is true, critics might quarrel with her nose, which wanted length, and other points of her face diverged from rule and line, but imperfections were veiled by the whole effect. As to her qualities, not everybody liked her—but this was only when she was indifferent about their liking; for she could make her manner her greatest attraction. Her character was a puzzle and a contradiction. Fretful and

peevish one moment, the next she was all smiles; now she showed every variation of mood, and unfolded the secrets of her heart; anon she infused deception in her every look and word. But, what was most strange, in all these changes she could make herself lovable, and did retain a spring of good feeling.

She saw Annie return home, watched her alighting from the carriage, and heard her go up-stairs with Miss Cottle, but she thought it well to defer revealing herself. It would be time enough to have a meeting next morning. Annie, meanwhile, would hear that she had a fellow lodger, and have time to estimate all the disagreeables of such a position, whence she might be more reconciled to finding a friend. And the delay was welcome to Jessie. To do her justice, she disliked the part imposed upon her, and knew not how to present herself. That Annie would suspect collusion with her father, could not be doubted; for she must be aware, Jessie thought, that it was Mr. Blandford who had taken away her mother,

and, consequently, that he knew her retreat. Jessie, indeed, had exceeded her instructions, in quartering herself in the same house, the bill in Miss Cottle's window, which she observed in passing, suggesting this step by the opening it presented. But how was she to proceed next? The question cost her a wakeful night, and she revolved a dozen plans, without being satisfied with one. At last, she determined to come on Annie by surprise, and treat the thing as a frolic, admitting inspiration from Mr. Blandford, but not acknowledging his control.

Next morning she listened for Annie's step in the passage, and opened her door as she came near, greeting her with a ringing laugh.

"Jessie!" cried Annie, astonished.

Jessie put her arms round her.

"You truant!" she said. "I intended to scold you severely, but now I have found you again, I have no mind for scolding, and must either laugh or cry."

"You have laughed enough," replied Annie, "perhaps you have cause, but it is

no laughing matter to me." And she drew back.

"Now you want me to cry," rejoined Jessie, the ready tears brimming in her eyes.

"I will be candid," said Annie, less bitterly, "and acknowledge that it pains me to see you lend yourself to such a device as this."

"You are unkind, Annie Blandford!" returned Jessie, drawing her into the room, while she used her other hand to close the door. "Is it for you to bring such an accusation against me? you who have been my sister! What am I lending myself to, pray? Your papa told me you were here, and I said I would come to you, thinking it might prevent your being interfered with —thinking, too, you would be as glad to see me, as I should you. This is all the device I know of. Is it so criminal? If you don't want me to stop, you have only to say so, and I can go away."

Annie was silent. But Jessie saw that she had made an impression, and returned to the charge. "Tell me what you wish,

Annie. Shall I leave you, or am I to remain? I will submit to be taken on trial for a few days, if you like."

"This is no subject for jesting," replied Annie, reproachfully.

"I am in sober earnest—though, to say truth, it has seemed to me hitherto that this whole business is a charade."

"Then you can't know what it has sprung from—how my father has provoked it, and what he contemplates. You do not! say so—and I will acquit you of any complicity with him."

Jessie remembered that she could not work out her mission, if she pretended ignorance of the points in question. She was to aim at reconciling Annie to her father's arrangements, and how could she approach this subject if she professed herself unacquainted with Annie's position. She recognised the difficulty on the instant, and saw that she must be truthful.

"Don't, don't mistrust me, dear Annie," she said, entreatingly. "You terrify me with your suspicions, which I have done

nothing to deserve. When I spoke so lightly, I did, indeed, forget your trouble, but it was because I was thinking of your romance,—not from want of sympathy. But I can't speak of this now. You have made me so wretched, my thoughts are all astray, and your own are not under control. You are going out—go, and you can tell me your decision when you come in—if I am here." And she partly turned away.

"My decision is taken, Jessie," said Annie. "I wish you to stay."

Jessie's face brightened, though she allowed a tear to burst through her long eyelashes. "Now you have healed all my wounds," she said, pressing a kiss on Annie's lips. "I shall get a little sad again in your absence, but you will find it all over when you return."

So they parted, Annie going forth to attend to her pupils.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE WATCH.

Before her interview with Jessie, Annie had written a note to Dr. Chowler, informing him of the departure, or what she inclined to regard as the abduction of her mother, and her own intention to remain at Surbiton, notwithstanding. The despatch was intrusted to a boy, with instructions to carry it immediately to Mount St. Bernard, but on his way he unfortunately fell into the hands of Mrs. Booles. That highly-connected dame not only ascertained his destination, but overhauled the note, and, though unable to reach its contents, saw too clearly what it imported. Annie had turned up her nose at Mrs. Booles's apart-

ments—perhaps, at Mrs. Booles herself: she and her mother had then gone straight to Mrs. Booles's enemy, and taken *her* apartments—and for what reason? obviously because they suited them best—suited the purpose Annie had in view, the purpose of *carrying-on*, of intriguing, and scheming. No wonder there had been two carriages at the door. Mrs. Booles knew that carriages didn't leave their spheres in Surbiton for nothing—not even four-wheels; for she had never received a visit from her quondam intimate, Mrs. Major Noseworthy, *née* Jane Jukes. Yet here was this minx attracting carriage-folks after a few weeks' residence! But Mrs. Booles saw what it meant. Annie was trading on her good looks, and, while aiming at a grand match, inveigled married as well as single men, all being fish who came to her net. In fact she made use of them all; for they all helped to give her a "footing"—Mrs. Booles's term for what Mrs. Chowler called "position." Mrs. Booles had not overlooked the frequent appearances of Alfred Mockright before the

house, nor his glances at Annie's window—which, of course, were signals; and now she found her dispatching notes to Dr. Chowler, a MARRIED MAN! It was important to follow up this discovery, and she lost no time in putting on her bonnet, and posting herself at the window, ready to slip out and dog Annie directly she came forth.

The experience of Mrs. Booles taught her that "men," as she roughly designated the *gentler* sex, were "bad," an indictment which might have provoked little cavil, if she had not pronounced women to be "worse." As this assumption must be false, it is possible that she may have been somewhat prejudiced in forming the other, and that men are not so black as she painted them. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that her opinion received confirmation on the present occasion; for as she watched at the window, Annie came out, and the same moment brought up Dr. Chowler, whence they actually had a meeting before Mrs. Booles's eyes. This incident thrilled her with indignation, of a kind

usually an enjoyment to her, but now marred by baffled curiosity; and she cursed her stars for not having prompted her to have the window open, so that she might hear, as well as see. The intriguers stood tantalisingly near, yet not a word could she catch, and she found no material for conclusions but Dr. Chowler's airs, which, indeed, were so fantastic as to make Mrs. Booles blush for his sex. Nevertheless, his conversation with Annie related solely to the complication arising from the departure of her mother.

"This is startling news," he said, "and I agree with you that it marks your father's hand, if not his personal intervention. But I have a few minutes to spare, and if it will be any satisfaction to you, we can go in and talk it over."

"You are very kind, but I don't know that I have anything more to say," answered Annie, not choosing to be closeted with Dr. Chowler, in her mother's absence: "at least, nothing but that I have no longer a doubt as to the mover being my father, for a friend

has informed me that he told her I was here, so he must have been here himself. Indeed, he may come for me any moment, but I shall only go with him on compulsion —or on arrangement."

"You have made up your mind about this?"

"It has been my resolution from the beginning."

"Then, by an arrangement you mean what you first proposed?"

"Yes—the cessation of legal proceedings, and a pledge that I shall not be separated from my mother."

"And have you any idea as to where your mother has been taken?"

"Not the least. I am very anxious about it—not from fear of her being harshly treated, but because she may be taken to some place where she will not be permitted to hear from me."

"We must find her out, then."

"Ah! if we could. But do you think it is possible?"

"Well, I have a capital ferret, a man I

employ in all mysteries. You know," and Dr. Chowler not only cocked his head, but put on a roguish smile—"I am a man of mysteries, and he will find her, if she is in the three kingdoms. But you have seen the man—Touton, the porter, you remember, who brought you and your mamma to my office."

"I remember him perfectly: such an honest looking man!"

"Ah! honesty doesn't go by looks: you know a man may smile and smile again and be a villain, and he may be a knave too. But Touton is to be trusted, whether honest or not. I will send him down to you to-day—for he must begin his inquiries at this house, and you will thus see his way of working. At what time do you return?"

"In two hours from now, and I shall wait at home till he comes."

"That business is settled, then, and now is there anything else I can do for you?" And Doctor Chowler looked very amiable: perhaps too amiable.

His question reminded Annie of something

she wished to say, but knew not how to approach, for it related to a subject that from its delicate bearings, she felt a repugnance to mention.

"I—" she faltered, and dropped her eyes —"should be much obliged—" Dr. Chowler thought this hesitation could herald only a request for money, and generously felt for his purse—"if you could delay the suit about mamma's marriage," pursued Annie.

The conclusion so diverged from the proctor's expectations, that it rather threw him off his balance.

"We will see what can be done when the time comes," he said, confusedly; "but we can't take any measures at present; for up to this moment no suit has been begun."

"I am glad to hear that," rejoined Annie, with evident relief.

It was on his tongue to ask her why, but he reflected that she could have but one reason—a woman's reason, blending a wish to defer exposure with a hope that she might pick up a husband before it came. For, by his vocation, he had been brought to look so

obliquely at the sex, that he did not see the incompatibility of such a motive with Annie's sensibility, of which her present position afforded such proof.

They would now have parted, but their road was the same as far as the station, and, as Annie moved, the Doctor walked at her side, talking all the way, and only bade her adieu at the gate.

Annie feared she was behind time, not having allowed in her programme for the conferences with Jessie and Dr. Chowler; and she would now have hurried if it had been in her nature. As it was, she passed down the Claremont road at her usual pace, rather puzzled by Dr. Chowler's eccentricities, but, on the whole, cheered by him. The effect appeared in her face, tinting her cheek, and lighting her glance, so that passers-by turned to admire her as she moved by.

She had reached the end of the road, and was crossing towards the river, when she came on Alfred Mockright. Her appearance took Alfred by surprise—rather a strange result, when he had been expecting it for some

time, but strange phenomena do happen in real life.

"Miss Staunton!" he exclaimed, not forgetting to off-hat. "I beg your pardon—a thousand pardons."

"For what?" said Annie, with a friendly recognition.

Alfred's reply was not very direct.

"Splendid day for the river," he remarked. He was in waterman's full dress.

"I should imagine so," replied Annie.

"Miss Chowler—you know her!—has been asking me to take her for a row. What do you say?—would you like it? She is to be down at the Kingston ferry at one o'clock, and I shall be happy to pull you both up to Hampton if you will come."

This proposal astonished Annie, who was half disposed to be angry at first, but remembrances rose in her mind. She reflected also that Alfred meant it kindly, and, as a snob, did not see its impropriety.

"Pray does Miss Chowler expect me to be of the party?" she said.

"Well, I didn't mention it, but I will ar-

range all that. Will you give us the pleasure of your company?"

"How could you think of such a thing?" Annie replied, with a laugh. And she tripped off, without further adieu.

Mrs. Booles stood on the other side of the road, and watched this proceeding.

"They've been arranging a meeting," she muttered. "She is carrying on! But I'll spoil her sport."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DAUGHTER OF THE WOKKING MAN.

Annie attended all her pupils, and then, free again, bent her steps to Cleveland road, one of the haunts of the poor. Her business was to find out Midge, the "substitute," and this she soon accomplished, the house being revealed by Midge's appearance at the door. The father of the substitute was one of those immaculate beings, a working-man—that is, he worked three days a week, and devoted the other four to drinking the proceeds and thrashing his wife. The penalty fell on his progeny; and Midge was the only one who came into the world alive; for the critical moment always found him ferocious, and always with the same result. Mrs. Midge

was the bread-winner, compassing this object by going out washing, and she was thus absent from home at the moment of Annie's visit. But there sat Mr. Midge, in the uniform of a bricklayer, and looking dirty and sottish; and there stood Midge herself, curtseying and bobbing, and in as untidy a state as ever.

Annie glanced round the room. It was miserably furnished, and evidently served both for sitting and sleeping: still it was clean, and Annie recognised evidence of Midge's strong points, scrubbing and polishing.

"I hoped to have found you ready to go with me, Midge," she said. "Your mother came last night, and saw Miss Cottle, and I told her I should call for you."

"Why ain't you ready?" demanded Mr. Midge, with a hiccup. "I'm glad she'll be under you, ma'am," he added, to Annie. "There ain't a better girl nowhere—*hiccup*—only she wants a little looking after: all girls do."

Mr. Midge seemed proud of having de-

livered this oracle, and tried to hold up his head, but it was too top-heavy.

"I intended you to have on the dress I sent you," said Annie to Midge.

"Dress!" exclaimed Mr. Midge, looking round. "You never told me about a dress."

Midge trembled.

"Didn't your mother give it to you?" asked Annie.

"No, miss."

"I'll see about this," cried Mr. Midge, starting up. "I'll go to her, and find out what she's done with it." He moved towards the door, but suddenly turned round, and touched his hat. "I'd like to drink your health, miss, if you'd give me a glass of beer."

This familiar request of the working-man frightened Annie; it came upon her like "stand and deliver," and she hastily produced some halfpence, all she had in her pocket, and placed them in his hand.

"Thank-ee, ma'am," said Mr. Midge, and disappeared.

Midge now found a tongue. "Please,

miss, I've got the dress, only mother told me not to let father know, or he'd sell it."

Annie looked grave. "And so you told a falsehood!"

The substitute hung her head. "Mother said I was, miss."

"Now, listen to me, Midge. I had rather the dress were burnt than you should say what was not true, and I can have nothing to do with you if you don't always speak the truth."

Midge began to cry.

"I forgive you this time, if you promise me for the future," said Annie, more gently.

The substitute promised on oath—mentally.

"I hope you will keep your word," said Annie. "Now, I shall leave you to follow me, when you have put on your dress, and mind you come neat, so as not to give every one an unpleasing impression of your appearance."

Midge promised again, nor did she break faith; for the glory of a new dress stimulated her zeal, and sent her before Miss Cottle in

a faultless state within the hour. The result was that she found herself again installed as a substitute—not being judged old enough for a "girl."

CHAPTER XX.

THE FERRET.

Annie, as usual, had loitered at one place and another till she found herself close on the moment appointed for her meeting with Touton, and she thought it expedient to hasten home—haste with her simply meaning that she must refrain from scanning the window of every drapery and bonnet shop. This was easy in the present case; for her thoughts were preoccupied. She not only felt impatient to institute the search for her mother, and, consequently, kept pondering the subject at intervals; but she busied herself with considering how she could see Touton without the cognizance of Jessie. She had, indeed, got over her distrust of Jessie. The statement of that young lady

presented her in a light so little below an angel that Annie began to regard her coming almost as an angel's visit; she felt that it would, as Jessie said, be a protection to her, while it gave her the companionship of one she loved; and, therefore, it was not from want of confidence in Jessie that she conceived this wish. But the breach between her father and mother was to her a sacred matter. Jessie, it is true, had intimated that she knew what was in progress, but this did not reconcile Annie to bringing the subject forward in their social intercourse. Hence she rejoiced to hear on reaching home that Jessie had gone for a stroll, and her satisfaction was presently completed by the arrival of Touton. Miss Cottle brought him into a back room for greater privacy, and would have left Annie alone with him, but Annie, believing she might be required for reference, begged her to remain.

"I knew you directly I saw you, miss," was Touton's salutation to Annie. "It isn't often I forget a face I've seen *yonder*, and nobody could ever forget yours."

Annie smiled at the rough compliment.

"I am ashamed to say that I hardly remember you," she said. "There is something changed about you—I don't know what."

Touton put on a grin. "It ain't the quid, you see, miss," he replied, touching his cheek. "Now, asking your pardon, can you guess what it is?"

Annie looked him over, a proceeding by which he seemed both flattered and amused.

"I think I must give it up," Annie said.

"Of course, you must," said Touton, waggishly. "I never knew anybody could tell what it was, and I've tried many. Yet it is a simple thing, too. Now look at this photograph of me, miss, as I stand at the corner by Paul's. Don't you see it's the apron?"

He handed Annie a photograph, representing him in official costume, and in a Napoleonic attitude, at the entrance to Doctor's Commons, and, certainly, the apron formed the prominent feature in the picture.

"So it is," said Annie—and Miss Cottle

concurred. "I should never have thought it made such a difference."

"Pray why do you wear an apron?" asked Miss Cottle.

"There you have me, ma'am. I don't know why we wear an apron, except that the apron 's an institution, and institutions must be kept up, even though they're no use, and you can't tell what they mean. Perhaps our institution is took from the ladies—asking pardon for the liberty, ma'am, but they wear aprons, you know, and what with licenses to marry and unmarry, we've a deal to do with ladies. I never could see any other reason for it."

"It is evidently a mystery, and defies unravelment," said Annie, anxious to change the subject. "I hope we shall be more successful in the business that has brought you here, Mr. Touton."

"That's what we'll now see about, miss, if you please. And the first thing to learn is the description of the vehicle your ma' went away in. Was it a regular carriage, or only a common concern, such as a cab?"

"It was not a cab," replied Annie. "But all your questions must be put to Miss Cottle; for I know nothing but from her."

"And unfortunately I can tell little," said Miss Cottle. "I can answer you about the carriage, however: it was a private one, shut up, and had a postilion."

"A postilion! that's telling a good deal, ma'am: it's telling that the gentleman didn't employ his own coachman, because he didn't want him to be talking about where he'd come from; so he gets a postilion, and I shouldn't wonder if he got him close by. Now do you think you ever saw the postilion before?"

"I thought I knew his face, but I must have been mistaken."

"I ain't so sure of that, ma'am. Is there no place in Surbiton where a gentleman can get a carriage and postilion?"

"I go about so little, I am really unable to say."

"I believe they can be had at the hotel," interposed Annie.

"There you are!" exclaimed Touton.

"Now, ma'am, suppose we walk down to the hotel, and look round, and see if there's a man there like that postilion—because I should be glad to drink a pint of beer with that individual if I can find him."

Miss Cottle assented, to the great comfort of Annie, who began to look upon Touton as a miracle of penetration. The good spinster was soon ready, and she and Touton sallied forth for the hotel, which, standing in the enclosure of the station, was only a stone's throw distance. The stables flank the road, and they reconnoitred the coach-house, which stood open, but, though several men were there, they saw nobody Miss Cottle could identify. Touton seemed baffled for a moment.

"You see that row of cabs there, ma'am," he then said, with a gesture towards the station. "Now I'd thank you to be so good as walk past it, and look at the cabmen, I've known 'em turned into postilions in country places, and I suppose his being in a different dress wouldn't deceive you?"

"I think not—because I observed him particularly, and it is so recent."

She walked up to the stand, and Touton awaited her return.

"Well, ma'am," he said, as she came back: "I see by your face he's there!"

"Yes," replied Miss Cottle, excitedly; "he is the third man on the stand."

"Then you've done a good afternoon's work, ma'am; and now please to tell miss you've put me on the track."

And, with these words, Touton strode towards the stand.

CHAPTER XXI.

DITTON FERRY.

Touton's message cheered Annie, who now hoped at least to learn tidings of her mother, if she could not find means to send her a letter, and this would reconcile her to a temporary separation. She was still revolving the matter with Miss Cottle, when they were interrupted by the return of Jessie. Annie had told Miss Cottle her relations with Jessie, and in what way that young lady had found her out; and the good spinster, though she said nothing, had been rather disturbed by the information. Hence her manner towards Jessie showed a little backwardness, but this was of the less consequence, as Jessie hardly noticed her, and

found Annie herself all affection. Still, the meeting did not appear satisfactory to another observer, the old parrot; and, after eyeing the party from his perch, he candidly, though enigmatically, expressed this view by exclaiming "fi! fo! fum!"

"What's that?" cried Jessie, looking up. "Oh! you dear ugly old bird! What do you mean?"

"Fi! fo! fum!" repeated Poll, with a solemn look, which quite overcame Annie, and even brought a smile to the lips of Miss Cottle.

But both Annie and Miss Cottle became serious the next moment, for Poll began to sharpen his bill, and this operation unmistakably presaged a screaming fit. Annie proposed a retreat to the next room, but Poll's warnings were short, and he burst into full cry before they reached the passage.

"What a horrid noise," cried Jessie. "Pray, pray stop him: it terrifies me."

"Nonsense!" laughed Annie. "Stop your ears as I do, and you will come to think nothing of it."

"It will kill me," said Jessie. "Can't Miss Cottle give him a dose of strychnine; and get rid of him?"

The proposal horrified Miss Cottle, and she slunk away, while Annie led Jessie into the front room. Here she shut the door, and turned entreatingly to her companion.

"Now, Jessie, you must put up with Poll for my sake," she said. "They say there is always something disagreeable in lodgings, and Poll is amusing, as well as noisy, and he is the only friend poor Miss Cottle has in the world. You will bear with him, won't you?"

"Well, I suppose I must."

"Thank you. And I assure you Poll improves on acquaintance, though he is certainly an incorrigible screamer. Now I would take you for a ramble, only you have been walking so long."

"Don't let that consideration influence you; for I spent the whole time in a shop; and I should like a walk above all things."

"We will go, then."

Annie went up stairs for her hat, and

would have returned immediately, only her eye lighted on a new buckle, which she stopped to examine; then she was attracted by a pair of sleeves, and then took to exploring a drawer, all which incidents consumed time. At last, she stood equipped, and rustled down to Jessie.

"We will go to Ditton ferry," she said, "and cross over, when we shall have a very pretty walk by the river."

"Very well," replied Jessie, "I care not where we go, so long as I am with you."

With this, they went out, Annie chatting pleasantly, but Jessie rather silent, a fact of which Annie, accustomed to the variableness of her mood, took no notice. So they came to the ferry, and were pulled across, landing on a path between the Home Park and the water. It was a walk that offered privacy without involving loneliness; for, while little frequented, it was protected, so to speak, by the river, where boats were constantly passing. And the spot interested Annie. The ground was turfed between the path and the park fence; a giant tree threw

over its shade; and, here and there, brambles seemed to reclaim the strip for Nature. Opposite stood Ditton Lodge, and the mansion of Boyle Farm, with lawns sloping to the water; and the rustic spire of Thames Ditton rose over meads beyond.

High in the air a lark at Heaven's gate sang, and Annie stood and listened, giving a response of music in her bosom.

"I wonder you can bear that din," said Jessie, peevishly. "It is almost as bad as the parrot's screaming. Gush, gush—throb, throb—my ear aches with it!"

"Your ear is out of tune just now," replied Annie, walking on with her. "You will be in better spirits as we come back, and then you will recognise the concord of sweet sounds, if the lark is still singing."

"I shan't be in better spirits to-day."

"That is decisive," laughed Annie. "I see you have made up your mind to it."

"You never sympathise with me, Annie—never say a word to comfort me, no matter how I am suffering. I sometimes think it is from want of sensibility, but I believe it is

more from thoughtlessness. You can go into the dumps yourself, but you seem to have an impression that nobody else should: at least, you only teaze me when I am melancholy."

"Now you are unjust, Jessie. I try to cheer you—I have been trying ever since we came out, but this is because I see you need rousing, not because I give you no sympathy. And mopes are catching, you know. I wasn't aware that I indulged in them so much as you say; but, anyhow, we mustn't both be melancholy at the same time. I give you leave to resist the disposition in me; and I shall do my best to combat the evil spirit in you."

"*The evil spirit!*" exclaimed Jessie, suddenly stopping, and turning pale. "What do you mean?"

"How you agitate yourself about nothing," answered Annie, in a tone of remonstrance. "I never knew you give way before in this manner, and the habit will grow upon you, if you don't fight against it. Now do compose yourself, Jessie. You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost—but *the evil spirit*," murmured Jessie.

Tears were in her eyes, and Annie, seeing she was excited, thought it well to let them flow, standing by her silent.

"I will tell you some day—not all—and yet—but no!" Jessie rapidly ejaculated. "Ah! you think me crazy, don't you? I am, as you say, very bad to-day—perhaps from the excitement of coming here, and our meeting—and—and—yes, I own, your unexpected kindness. Now I am better. And you shall know by and by something of what it is that troubles me, the weight here," —she pressed her bosom—"and which has to-day filled me with presentiments. I am a little superstitious, you know."

"And a little fanciful—are you not? But now get it all out of your mind. I see it is going."

"Going, going, gone!" said Jessie. And a smile lit up her face.

But now a shade stole over Annie's. "I declare there are Alfred Mockright and Arabella Chowler," she said, suddenly—"there, in that boat! I quite forgot they

were coming on the river, though Arabella won't think so, but will put the worst construction on my being here. We can't turn back, can we?"

"I am afraid they have seen us," answered Jessie. "I shouldn't mind them, but go straight on, and keep our eyes off the river."

Alfred, who was returning from Hampton, and, consequently pulling towards them, had, however, as she supposed, looked round, and recognised Annie.

"By Jove, there is Miss Staunton!" he exclaimed, his cheek flushing.

"So it is!" responded Arabella, who had made the discovery five minutes before, but, wishing no addition to the company, hoped that Annie would pass unobserved.

"I will pull to the bank, so that we may intercept her," pursued Alfred.

"Well, as we don't know her friend, that won't be the thing," rejoined Arabella. "It will be better just to bow."

"But I want to speak to her. She might be persuaded to take a row, as she has a friend with her; anyhow, I will ask her."

Alfred, contrary to Annie's impression,

had not mentioned to Arabella his previous invitation, as he had no inclination to state that he had been refused.

"Pray, don't," urged Arabella, in a vexed tone. "What do we know of her friend?—a dressmaker, perhaps! I don't mind associating with Staunton"—Arabella thought it majestic to call Annie by her surname—"but I *kannt* take up with her friends. Mamair wouldn't like it."

"Stuff!" said Alfred, in his polite manner. "Her friends are as good as ours, I'll wager; for she is rather too stand off, if anything—only she does it in such a natural way."

This remark was not to Arabella's taste, and though her little assumptions seldom carried her into spite, her gorge rose against Annie, as a possible rival. Still, she put on a smile when the boat, reaching the bank, brought them in front of Annie and Jessie.

"I saw you coming, Miss Staunton," cried Alfred, standing up, "and have pulled in to beg, if you are going to Hampton, that you will let me row you there—and your friend,

of course," he added, with a polite recognition of Jessie.

His manner showed a little shyness, but seemed to Annie to have shed some of its roughness, though Arabella, less alive to the defect, did not observe the improvement.

"Thank you," replied Annie; "but we have come expressly for a walk."

"I daresay you would like a walk, too, after being cooped so long in the boat?" said Alfred to Arabella. "I can tie the boat to this post, and leave it, if you would."

"Not on *my* account," answered Arabella, with a stress on the pronoun, by her air giving Annie the impression that she was engaged to Alfred.

"Why just now you wanted to walk, and proposed to go in the grounds," laughed Alfred—"only I felt tired then. Now won't you confess that young ladies are very wayward?" he added to Jessie.

"I confess to nothing on such a subject, except to a friend of the order," replied Jessie, "and I am afraid we must set you down as an enemy."

"No, no! don't say that. Pray, speak a word for me, Miss Staunton, for I hope this isn't your opinion?"

Annie was amused at his taking the imputation so seriously.

"What does Miss Chowler say?" she answered, "I think we can't do better than leave judgment with her."

The reference soothed Miss Chowler, who looked up, and half smiled at Annie.

"I think judgment is reserved," observed Jessie. "But Miss Chowler has given an answer to the proposal for a walk, and it is only what Mr. Mockright might expect—

> "Those who will not when they may,
> When they will, they shall have nay?"

"I think we are all too *haird* upon him," said Arabella, deeming it politic to come to Alfred's rescue. "And I'll tell you how it was about the walk," she added, colouring, as she raised her eye to Annie's.

She went into a long explanation, but what it explained Annie could not discover, and two or three interpellations by Alfred made the statement more obscure. Never-

theless, it engaged their attention, and thus masked the approach of two horsemen coming from Hampton, and whose steeds moved noiselessly over the turf. Suddenly, however, Annie became aware of their vicinity, and, at the same time, missed Jessie, whom she then saw hurrying towards the ferry, and signalling the ferryman to come over for her. This proceeding astonished Annie, though she was prepared for any eccentricity in her companion, and her perplexity was increased the next moment on perceiving that the two horsemen were Charles Harrifield and his friend Travers. They had stopped to speak to Alfred, and their look showed that they already recognised her.

"Pray introduce me to your pretty friend," said Harrifield, bending over his horse to Alfred, and speaking apart.

Annie was starting in pursuit of Jessie, when Alfred, only too glad to detain her, complied with this request.

"I mustn't introduce Harrifield's friend to you, Miss Staunton," he continued, "be-

cause I can't give him a character, and, besides, I intend to fight a duel with him the first time we meet on the top of Vesuvius."

Annie turned an amused glance on Travers.

"What have I done now?" cried Travers, looking the image of innocence.

"What I can blame nobody for but myself, as I ought to have remembered your pranks at college," laughed Alfred. "To think of my trusting you to tell the cabman where he was to take me the other night!"

"You must have been in that happy condition which entails a headache next morning," observed Harrifield.

"And that caused him to dream something about the cabman, which he wants to fasten on me," said Travers. "I thought at the time he was a little hilarious."

"Delirious, you mean," rejoined Alfred. "Fancy his telling the cabman to take me for the last train to King's Cross, instead of Waterloo, Miss Staunton. Of course, I was sold, and had to stop in town all night."

"I must say that was very provoking," said Annie, with an amused smile, though she was fidgetting to follow Jessie.

"You forget that he is supposed to have been in the state of happiness," observed Travers; "not that this forbids his feeling provoked; for Trinculo, in the same condition, declared he was in case to jostle a constable, and perhaps Mockright fell foul of a policeman."

They all laughed at this insinuation, but Alfred made no retort, as Arabella, sitting unnoticed in the boat, and fretting that she had been thus thrown in eclipse, now, by speaking aloud to Annie, called general attention to the flight of Jessie.

"You will hardly overtake her, unless she waits at the ferry for you," she added.

"I am really quite ashamed that I never noticed her going," said Alfred, colouring, as he feared that Annie might again doubt his good manners.

"It doesn't matter," observed Annie. "She will stop at the ferry for me, I have no doubt."

She was again turning away, when Alfred begged to be allowed to row her down; and Harrifield, with a sudden exclamation, said he would ride forward, and ask the young lady to wait their coming. Before anyone could speak, he was on his way, a result which seemed to terrify Jessie; for she jumped into the ferry boat, without staying till it touched the bank. Harrifield called out, but she averted her head, and motioned the ferryman to proceed.

"She won't stop," said Alfred, as he walked forward with Annie, leaving Arabella and Travers with the boat.

"It is so odd of her," replied Annie, a little vexed. "I am sorry Mr. Harrifield rode after her, for she shrinks from strangers, and she wouldn't have crossed without me, if he had remained quiet. But as he did it with the best intention, we mustn't say so."

Harrifield stood watching the boat, as the ferryman shot across the river, in a moment reaching the opposite bank. Here Jessie landed, and, without looking round for Annie, disappeared behind the trees.

Harrifield was very pale, but assumed a smile as Annie and Alfred came up.

"What a bolt!" he said. "Who is she?"

"She is my friend," answered Annie, quietly.

"That is a sufficient credential," rejoined Harrifield, with a courtly air, "and requires me to ask pardon for the freedom of the question; but the truth is—" here his lip seemed to quiver—"I thought she was also a friend of mine."

"Indeed!"

"A phantom friend," he said, with a light laugh.

"Yes, a vampire," cried Travers, who had just rode up: "a skeleton in his cupboard, I think it is called."

Annie laughed now. "You are really shocking, Mr. Travers," she said. "How can you call a young lady—and one so attractive—a skeleton."

"I wouldn't for the world!" exclaimed Travers. "What I said was that Harrifield fancied her one. And attractions don't prevent this; for a cupboard makes a skeleton of

the greatest beauty—and of the fattest virago, for that matter. Certainly, the young lady has answered the purpose of a skeleton, as she has given Harrifield a sensation."

"I wish she could have given you sense," muttered Harrifield.

But here attention was diverted to the ferryboat, which, by Jessie's orders, came over for Annie, and, as it touched the bank, both he and Alfred aspired to hand her in. The lot fell on Harrifield, who presented himself on the nearer side, and Alfred anathematized his awkwardness, which led him to the other. It was the more provoking as Annie looked so bewitching. Her face had not only cast off its little cloud of vexation, but wore a glow of pleasure, which gave a piquancy to the pretty timidity of her movement, as her foot hovered over the boat. Harrifield seized the moment to murmur a parting word.

"This is not the first time we have met," he said, "and something tells me it will not be the last. Rivers can be crossed."

"I have no doubt of it," replied Annie, archly, "or I should not make the venture."

She took her seat in the boat, and the ferryman pushed off as a smile bore her adieu to all.

"Is it fair to ask if you have known this enslaver long, Mockright?" Harrifield then said.

"Why not?" answered Alfred. "I have entered into no bond of secrecy on the subject, nor does she seek any."

"That is more than you can tell," cried Travers. "We happen—"

"Now do hold your tongue, Travers—do, I beg," exclaimed Harrifield, with an entreating gesture, which his friend could not resist. "The fact is, Mockright," he continued, "we have seen her before, and believe there is some romance connected with her, but this is only conjecture—a conjecture you can probably set at rest."

"I can tell you nothing about her, as we —I mean my family—have but recently made her acquaintance," replied Alfred.

"And her friend—the girl who ran away so unaccountably?"

"I never saw her till half an hour ago,

and don't even know her name. Miss Staunton mentioned it, when she introduced her, but I wasn't expecting an introduction, and didn't catch what she said. This is all the information I can stop to give you as I have, you see," he glanced towards the spot where he had left Arabella and the boat—"another lady to look after."

"I am glad you have remembered that, at last," observed Harrifield.

"She will make him remember it if she is a daughter of Eve," remarked Travers, as Alfred hurried away, and he and Harrifield mounted their steeds; "and I believe her descent from that matron is indisputable. Fortunately for him they are not spliced yet, or she would wig his ears off."

"Ah! I saw you chatting with her in the boat—taking her measure, I suppose; and I fancy she took her revenge on the two girls at the same time."

"Perhaps, she did, but it was neatly done."

"Just as she would unrip a garment. I know women pick each other to pieces as they do their old clothes, and turn the inside

out. Now tell me, without any bouncing, what she said of them."

"Your invocation is so civil, that I will the plain unvarnished tale deliver, as the best way of spiting you. Know, then, your supposed heroine is a music teacher, and her runaway friend is believed to be a dressmaker."

"Then I shall think the better of music-teachers and dressmakers for their sake, though I always *have* thought well of them —when they were good-looking. But we must push on now; or we shall keep Dashwood waiting." And they pricked their horses to a gallop.

Alfred had now reached the boat, where Arabella, belying Travers's prediction, received him with smiles. Had her ground been surer, she might have shown restiveness; but there are seasons when petticoat government, like parliamentary, is on its trial, and it is especially so when a young lady is courting a bachelor. The administration must then be all sugar. The young lady has to remember that it is the man's time now, but that it will be hers by-and-

bye, and this will make it easy for her to be agreeable under the greatest provocations. It was mortifying to Arabella that Annie should receive attention at her expense, and for a moment her feelings stuck in her throat, but she made an effort, and gulped them down. Her policy was not to look out for slights, but to study Alfred, and by bending to his humour, and adopting his tastes, gradually bring him to consider her a part—of course the better part—of himself.

"You must give me another lesson in rowing as we go home," she said as he stepped into the boat. "I think I shall do better this time."

"Then, we must unship the rudder," replied Alfred. "Hillo! what has become of the tiller-ropes?"

"They were all right, just now," replied Arabella. "I noticed them when Mr. Travers sat down there."

"Ho! did he sit there! Ha! ha! we may bid good-bye to the ropes. Ah! here they are, cut in bits."

"What a shame! I wish I had caught him at it, I would have managed to pin something on his back. But we will owe him one for it."

"He won't mind that if it gives him a sensation. Now I will take the front seat, and you sit here, Miss Chowler."

"I wish you wouldn't call me *Miss Chowler:* I don't like being *missed.*"

"But what am I to call you?"

"My name is Arabella—now say it!"

"Arabella."

"That's jolly. Say it again—I like to hear you."

"Arabella."

"Ha! ha! again—again! It makes me *laf* so."

"But we shall never get home at this rate," said Alfred.

"I am ready to pull," returned Arabella, who had thrown off her mantle, and grasped a skull—"only it is such fun to hear you say Ar—ra—bel—la! Ha! ha! ha!"

Alfred joined in the laugh, and they pulled along, Arabella keeping good time.

"I say, Alfred," she cried, after a pause.

It was the first time in his life that Alfred had been astonished at the sound of his name, but it now came upon him like a novelty.

"Hillo!" he answered, rather bluffly.

"Don't you smoke?"

"Not when I am with ladies," replied Alfred, unconscious that that was the very time for smoking.

"Pray don't stand upon such ceremony now. I like it, and think I might be persuaded to smoke cigarettes myself. Do light your pipe."

But Alfred withstood the temptation, and presently took the skull from Arabella, and pulled briskly on, Arabella undertaking the look-out, and beguiling the way with discourse. So they arrived at the landing.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONFIDENCE.

Annie made her way home, and was admitted by Midge, whose trim had already deteriorated; and Annie noted a splash on her new dress, and the old tendency to bush in her hair.

"Why, Midge, I thought you intended to be tidy!" Annie said.

"Yes, miss."

"And you are almost as bad as you used to be. Now come and look at yourself."

And she led the substitute into the bedroom, and ranged her before the glass, a position which, to say truth, Midge did not object to in ordinary, but which now put her to confusion.

"I say, Alfred," she cried, after a pause.

It was the first time in his life that Alfred had been astonished at the sound of his name, but it now came upon him like a novelty.

"Hillo!" he answered, rather bluffly.

"Don't you smoke?"

"Not when I am with ladies," replied Alfred, unconscious that that was the very time for smoking.

"Pray don't stand upon such ceremony now. I like it, and think I might be persuaded to smoke cigarettes myself. Do light your pipe."

But Alfred withstood the temptation, and presently took the skull from Arabella, and pulled briskly on, Arabella undertaking the look-out, and beguiling the way with discourse. So they arrived at the landing.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONFIDENCE.

Annie made her way home, and was admitted by Midge, whose trim had already deteriorated; and Annie noted a splash on her new dress, and the old tendency to bush in her hair.

"Why, Midge, I thought you intended to be tidy!" Annie said.

"Yes, miss."

"And you are almost as bad as you used to be. Now come and look at yourself."

And she led the substitute into the bedroom, and ranged her before the glass, a position which, to say truth, Midge did not object to in ordinary, but which now put her to confusion.

couch, with her face veiled by her fallen tresses.

"Why, Jessie, what is the matter?" she cried, hastening towards her, and turning back the luxuriant hair from her face. "You are so unhappy to-day, I am sure you must be ill."

Jessie, indeed, looked as ill as unhappy.

"Be patient with me, Annie," she said, deprecatingly.

"How could I be otherwise, if you were to try me!" replied Annie; "but what you need is not patience, but sympathy. You are in some trouble; and, remember, I can understand this, since I know what trouble is."

"Not such trouble as mine! Heaven forbid you ever should!"

Annie was silent; for she did not wish to continue this subject, but rather to lead Jessie to other thoughts. For the same reason, she refrained from alluding to Jessie's flight from the river, considering, indeed, that it was accounted for by her fit of depression. Thus neither of them spoke for a

few minutes. But Jessie had other reasons for her abrupt return home than Annie supposed. There was real ground for Harrifield's impression that they were not strangers, and she fled to avoid recognition. Had she succeeded in this object? Harrifield's pursuit of her raised a doubt, and, with the doubt, a throng of emotions, passionate and distracting. It was thus her better nature often came to the surface—by a bound, like a half-drowned body, and then sank again in the depths. But now it stood out bolder than usual. As it emerged from the habit of deception, it threw off the restraint of years, the excitement of the moment engendering that desire to unburden which, in Roman Catholic countries, so attracts woman to the confessional. Not that even this feeling bore her from her guard. She maintained a check on herself, and achieved a purpose while she yielded to a transport. She wished to make some excuse for her conduct, which she knew Annie would think strange; and, at the same time, to ascertain if Harrifield had

asked who she was, or had shown any suspicion of her identity. But her acquaintance with Harrifield she determined not to reveal. And all these purposes she kept in view, even when most excited, holding by a rope, as it were, while she floated in the stream.

"You will think me mad to-day, Annie," she said. "But I shall throw the blame on you—at least, some of it; for your leaving your papa caused me such anxiety, and I was so excited on learning where you were, and by coming down here, that it seems to have unnerved me. I told you, as we walked along, I felt all kinds of presentiments, and they quite overpowered me, as we stood by the water. So I stole back towards the ferry, and that gentleman riding after me threw me in such a flurry, I was obliged to run away. He must have thought me very rude. What *did* he say?"

"I think he hardly knew; for you seemed to have thrown him into a flurry, too."

"How?" gasped Jessie.

"Well, he called you a phantom, and really looked as if he had seen one."

Jessie averted her face: *she was not forgotten!*

"What a strange person!" she said. "Not complimentary, but I mustn't complain of that, behaving as I did. He couldn't have meant that he had ever seen me before?"

"Certainly he did."

Jessie's heart beat quicker.

"You undeceived him, of course, by telling my name?" she observed, nervously.

"No: I said only that you were my friend," replied Annie.

Jessie threw her arms round her neck. Her anxiety was dispelled; she had preserved her secret, and now she reverted to her first feeling, which was to pour this secret into Annie's ear—not unreservedly, indeed, but still truthfully.

"You called me your friend, dear Annie," she said; "let me be so, and do you be mine—my own, only friend. I find comfort on your bosom. The sorrow I told you of—the sorrow that always seems to be choking me, is lightened. I say again, may you

never know its like! but it is one no woman is safe from; for it is the sorrow of disappointed love."

"You have loved, then, Jessie? surely you would not say it was without return?"

"Not without return, perhaps—but without blessing: without that which can alone satisfy a woman—union."

"Your lover was faithless!"

"No, no! he was young, thoughtless! not faithless. I listened to him too readily; it was my fault. I loved and I—I half yielded. We were flying in his carriage, his arm round my waist, my hand in his, my ear swallowing the honey of his vows—vows no priest was to sanctify. Ah! you are drawing away, but do not misjudge me. Suddenly the carriage stopped; the postilion called him out, and, for a moment alone, I realised my danger. I leaped from the open door, and glided into a wood. I flew along the path, I knew not where, but I was free—saved!"

Her arms closed tighter round Annie, and Annie returned their embrace.

"Now, I will hear no more," she said. "You must keep quiet for the rest of the day, and I daresay you will be in your usual spirits to-morrow."

Jessie claimed further discourse, but Annie put her finger on her lips, and Jessie, with a half sigh, submitted.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DIFFERENT ROADS.

A FORTNIGHT passed, and deepened the friendship of the two girls. They were much together, and Jessie atoned for her fretfulness on the first day by her subsequent vivacity. Her half-confidence to Annie, indeed, took a weight from her mind which for years had been under a strain, and the cheerfulness she evinced was unfeigned. At the same time, she did keep in view the importance of making herself agreeable to Annie, and she put out all her powers for the purpose. Annie, after a morning's worry with pupils, and of contact with Surbiton manners, found comfort in such a companion, and never asked herself

how long Jessie was to remain, nor whether her father secretly attached conditions to her stay. She confided in Jessie, and was content to enjoy her companionship without considering too closely how all would end.

Meanwhile, Jessie lost ground with Miss Cottle. She never sought to conciliate inferiors, except with a design, and she had no purpose that could be served by her hostess. It was requisite to treat her with a sort of friendliness, on account of her intimacy with Annie; but Jessie maintained a supercilious manner, which marred the effect. This, however, the poor spinster, accustomed to the contempt of the world, bore meekly, and would hardly have noted but for the contrast presented by Annie. What excited her resentment was Jessie's feud with her parrot. She could submit to be trampled upon herself, but her spirit rose for this friend of so many years of loneliness, and placed a bar betwixt her and Jessie.

Midge regarded Jessie with equal dislike, but for another cause. The substitute could

not be "tidy," strive as she might, and always broke out in a fresh place; wherefore, she might guard all the known points, yet somewhere there would be a flaw. Jessie never made any comment, but her eye always fell on the vulnerable spot, and pierced it through, so that the unhappy substitute stood in her presence like a cockchafer on a pin.

It was the duty of Midge to regulate Jessie's bedroom, and one morning found her thus engaged when she happened to pass the glass, and noticed that her hair had fallen into its chronic state. On the table lay Jessie's brushes, a perfect array, and their nice appearance operated as a spell on Midge. She took one up, and applied it to the disordered locks, when the effect encouraged her to seize a second, and brush on each side at once. She obtained further enjoyment by fancying herself a young lady, who had nothing to do but arrange her tresses, and gaze in the glass. The illusion was disturbed by the sudden opening of a door. She heard the voices of Jessie and

Annie, and just had time to drop the brushes when they entered.

Midge looked as if her energies had been engrossed by dusting—only such a gentle operation could hardly be expected to throw her into a violent perspiration.

"Midge, I don't like to be always finding fault," said Annie, "and now I am glad to praise you. You are really improved, and I shall begin to believe in you."

Midge clandestinely quivered; for she remembered a breach in one of her stockings, and her sensations intimated that Jessie's eyes had found it out.

"Your hair is quite respectable," continued Annie.

"I declare the wretch has been using my brushes!" cried Jessie.

Midge was paralysed.

"Midge!" exclaimed Annie, catechistically.

"She can't deny it," pursued Jessie. "Here is her hair to confront her." And she held up a hair of prodigious length.

"Please, miss," sued Midge, tremulously—

"I don't please," said Jessie. "How dare you take one of my brushes? But you may keep it now, for I shall never use it again." And she tossed the brush out of the window.

This proceeding confounded the substitute, who, after wavering between the alternative of crying and sinking through the floor, and finding the latter process attended with difficulty, gave way to tears.

"What can you say for yourself?" demanded Annie, sternly.

"I can't say nothing for myself, miss," sobbed Midge. "It's come o' looking in the glass, which mother said as it would turn my head."

"Then you should remember your mother's caution. All you can do now is to ask Miss Balcombe's pardon."

Midge asked with all her might.

"Get along with you," said Jessie, contemptuously. And Midge disappeared, accepting this dismissal as an act of grace and amnesty.

Annie looked at her watch. "I must

get along, too," she said; "for it is near my lesson time."

"I have to go out," replied Jessie, "and will walk with you to the corner—only you mustn't be an hour getting ready."

"Ha, ha! you think I am as fond of looking in the glass as Midge." And Annie went off.

Whatever fascination the glass possessed for Midge, Jessie acknowledged a like influence, and now equipped herself under its sway. She performed this toilet in the most thorough manner. True, her only cosmetic was water, but she applied it cunningly; then she carefully brushed her hair, arched her eyebrows, scrutinised her eyes and teeth, and put her face through every aspect. There remained no blemish that art could remove.

It may be thought that the same occupation engaged Annie at the same moment. But though she had the susceptibility of her sex on this point, Annie was wont to leave herself little margin for its indulgence, owing to her habit of dawdling. It hap-

pened that she now encountered Midge, and she could not resist this opportunity of at once improving the occasion and consuming the time.

"Midge, I want to speak seriously to you," she said, leading the way to her room. "Do you know how ill you have behaved?"

Midge looked as if she knew too well.

"Now, come here—sit down by me," continued Annie. "Just think what would become of you, if you lost your place?"

"Oh! don't give me a warning, miss," implored Midge, with tears.

"I do warn you"—here Midge's grief became uncontrollable—"not that I intend you to be sent away," continued Annie, "but I warn you that nobody will take an interest in you if you are not to be trusted."

It must be confessed that this prospect seemed less dismal to the substitute than dismissal, and her grief abated.

"Miss Balcombe threw the brush out of the window, and said you might keep it, but she didn't give it to you, remember. Now I, too, tell you to keep it, but never

use it—only look at it, and let it both remind you of your fault, and enforce your promise of amendment."

"Thank you, thank you, miss," sobbed Midge.

"Annie!" and the voice of Jessie came up the stairs.

"Coming!" answered Annie.

"What a time you are!"

Annie made a scramble, and got on her things somehow—her graceful form enabled them to arrange themselves, and she returned to Jessie smiling.

"Why are you so happy?" said Jessie, with a sigh.

"You know I am far from being so," answered Annie. "But we must talk as we go; for my watch shows I ought to be on my way."

Their talk was limited, however, for they went but a short distance together, parting at the railway. Each took a different road, but Jessie turned back in a few minutes, and after looking cautiously round, crossed to the hotel, and asked there for Mr. Blandford.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PROPOSAL DEFERRED.

Jessie was led to an upper room, while her card was taken to Mr. Blandford. She walked to the window, which, opening on a balcony, overlooked the garden—a pretty spot, bounded by the railway, and hemmed round by other gardens. Oak-hill rose in her front, the churchyard spire on her left, and trees everywhere, while the railway ran into a cutting, backed with a thicket of fir; a projection intercepted the view to the right, where the eye might else have reached to the towers of Windsor. But Jessie was not one to appreciate country, and she did feel an interest in the surrounding villas. She marked two or three of the largest, and appropriated them to merchant princes, un-

conscious of the delusiveness of appearances in a London suburb, and her imagination was dreaming of the treasures possessed by these shadowy magnates, when the door opened, and admitted Mr. Blandford.

Jessie turned round, and met the polished man of the world with a look as bland as his own.

"You are almost as punctual as Annie—only five minutes after time," Mr. Blandford said, making a reproof take the shape of a compliment. "I hope you have come to tell me your mission here has been successful."

"I have no doubt it will be," replied Jessie.

"Ah! ladies are proverbially sanguine," returned Mr. Blandford, in the same smooth tone, which left one in doubt whether he was ironical or earnest; "but one result, you know, is worth a host of expectations. You had no doubt when you first proposed to come; you still have none; but I daresay this doesn't mean that you have made no progress?"

"Certainly not. I have won Miss Blandford's confidence, gained an influence over her, and, I think, rendered myself almost indispensable to her. This is doing much in a fortnight."

"Pardon me there; to a person of your endowments, all this was a matter of course, and I shall be disappointed if you haven't done more. How has Annie taken your advice about returning home?"

"Well, I have not touched on that subject yet."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Blandford, with a smile of surprise.

"No!" answered Jessie, composedly. "I saw that if I did, I should make her mistrust me—that she would reject my advice, and that then the subject could not be resumed."

"I do homage to your discernment, but this is a lady's mode of making progress, and I don't see how it brings us nearer our object."

"I wish so to time my words, that the object may be accomplished in a moment," rejoined Jessie.

"You are always right, and nothing could be more desirable, but, unfortunately, I have entered into arrangements, which require Annie to be under my roof at once. I wish her to come out this season; I have spoken about it to Lady Clara Mullet; and the season won't stand still while we are manœuvring. But I needn't dwell on these points, because you have too quick a perception not to appreciate them."

"It is because I appreciate them that I wish to proceed cautiously, not to mar all by a hasty movement. Annie is so young—"

"While she is young is her time for coming out," interrupted Mr. Blandford. "I have views for her, and neither the views nor her youth will wait. She is now in her bloom: but her bloom may fade in a month; for I need hardly tell you that it is not every woman who retains her beauty at six-and-twenty."

"Let us hope Miss Blandford is safe for her teens, at any rate," replied Jessie, her lip trembling at the allusion to her own age. "But, since you desire it, I will speak to her

at once, and use every persuasion to bind her to your wishes—only I can't answer for success."

"No: you will, as you said just now, only make her mistrust you. There is but one way to proceed, Jessie; and it is the way I told you in the first instance. When you are out walking, you must lead her to the place I showed you, where I shall be waiting with a carriage, and will end all difficulty by taking her home."

"I can't do it, Mr. Blandford."

"What it is to have to deal with young ladies!" exclaimed Mr. Blandford, in a playful tone. "They are the most provoking, agreeable, unmanageable, compliant beings in existence; and Miss Jessie Balcombe unites all these characteristics in the highest degree. Now, pray what is there objectionable in this scheme? You acknowledge that I have no object but Annie's happiness. You are willing to set this before her in the strongest way; yet you raise up obstacles in your own scruples."

"It is useless for us to discuss this point,

sir," said Jessie, stiffly. "I have made up my mind not to move in it."

"Then you are coming round to what I suggest," rejoined the complaisant Mr. Blandford; "for when a young lady has made up her mind not to do a thing, she is always on the way to do it. And there are reasons why Jessie Balcombe should be willing to serve me—reasons why she shouldn't consider herself so independent of me, if she knew them."

"*I do know them*, and I recognise them, sir, as I hope I have often shown. I know that I owe all the advantages I possess—my education and my present position, to your *liberality*." Jessie seemed, by a variation of her tone, to lay a significant emphasis on the last word.

"So your mother couldn't keep that secret," said Mr. Blandford, smiling.

"*My mother had no secrets from me*," answered Jessie, slowly, with her eyes turned on the floor.

Mr. Blandford drew back, as if his breast had been struck by a bullet.

Jessie saw the start, though she did not look up, and she kept her eyes down even when Mr Blandford moved round to where she stood. She recognised the moment as a crisis in her life, bringing a collision long contemplated, though now rising unexpectedly, and she knew not whether it would produce a rupture or a compact. Indeed, her mind had no fixed impression at the moment, but was borne away by memories, as in the hour of death, when we are said to see, as from a height, all our past life in a glance. She thought not of Mr. Blandford, nor the passing incident, but of her own girlhood, and the lapse between. And here stood one central figure, the suitor for her love, impressing everything else, recalling her flight from his very arms, and her cherished hope that those arms would circle her again, when he should seek her out, and avow an honourable attachment; hope now dead, but embalmed, and treasured still. Mr. Blandford had reminded her that she was six-and-twenty, that woman bloomed to-day and withered to-morrow, and since

delays were so dangerous, must lose no time in capitalising their charms. She had paused too long, and must now put this dead and embalmed hope out of her sight. *She must marry!* This was the conclusion to which she came, or rather leaped, over the torrent of her memories. And now Mr. Blandford stood by her side.

"I can't pretend to misunderstand you, Jessie," he said. "You mean that the secrets you heard from your mother were mine?"

"Both yours and her own," replied Jessie, still looking down.

"How happily you describe them! Yes, they were as much hers as mine, for she had her proportion of the profit, and I see, from her bequeathing them to you, she intends them to be a family provision."

Jessie had resented Mr. Blandford's allusion to her age, but had cooled down, satisfied to have shown him that he was in her power, and remembering, as her judgment returned, that it was not her interest to quarrel. But she received this jibe at her

mother more in sorrow than in anger. Her face paled, her bosom heaved, and a tear burst from her eyes, and hung like a diamond in their long lashes. Then she became suddenly calm, in a moment mastering her emotion, and perhaps her conscience.

"My mother had no such intention," she said, in a quiet tone, "as you know she never sought these fatal secrets; they were confided to her, and she never betrayed them. I make no condition, and desire no reward, for maintaining the same silence."

"But silence is not one of the virtues of your sex, Jessie," said Mr. Blandford, in his mocking tone, "and the example of your mother doesn't appear so immaculate to me as to yourself. Now, what if I were to exact some other guarantee?"

Jessie took his offered hand, held it an instant, as if in hesitation, and then put it to her lips.

"You have the guarantee of my gratitude," she said softly.

The action appeased Mr. Blandford, flattering his vanity, while it allayed his mistrust,

and he did not leave it without response. In fact, it brought him to consider Jessie in a new relation. He never lost sight of the object for which he was seeking an annulment of his marriage, namely, the transmission of his estate to lineal heirs, and it occurred to him that when he obtained the decree, he would find no more eligible wife than Jessie. If he desired her silence, what would seal her lips like unity of interests, cemented by matrimony? and on the other hand, where, at his age, could he look for more affection? These considerations passed through his mind in a lump, as it were, and he decided for the match at once, though he was too wary, in circumstances so delicate, to do more than hint his intention.

"Since I hold this hand, I hardly like to release it," he said, with a gentle pressure, "but I know this must be now—only I shall hereafter ask you for a guarantee more durable than gratitude."

Again Jessie's face paled, and her lip trembled, but these signs of agitation, whatever they implied, were unnoted by Mr.

Blandford, who hurried on to the other subject on his mind.

"Now, Jessie, you really must help me in this business of Annie," he said. "Be assured, that when she is once in my charge, she will be too well satisfied to make it a grievance against you, and, indeed, it can't possibly be imputed to you, if you act as I have suggested."

"Give me three weeks," entreated Jessie. "Let me have time to reason with Annie; and if I can't prevail, I will act as you wish."

"Well, you shall have your way," said Mr. Blandford, pleasantly; "and I hope the result will verify the proverb in the length of your life."

Jessie rose to depart, and Mr. Blandford attended her to the passage. "In three weeks we meet again," he said, as they parted.

Jessie did not seem elated by the prospect of becoming his future wife; for as she emerged from the hotel, she drew a deep breath, as if relieved that the interview was over.

CHAPTER XXV.

RUNNING INTO DANGER.

On the same afternoon Dr. Chowler left Doctors' Commons earlier than usual, saving the 4.30 train, and thus securing a margin of time before his dinner hour. To a careless glance he might present no difference from his ordinary appearance at that stage of the day; yet a close observer would note something—a sort of renovation of his face, probably due to a wet towel, and a freshness in his whiskers, traceable to recent combing, while his cravat had been readjusted, and his clothes neatly brushed, whereas it was his custom to return from the wear of the day somewhat dusty and rusty. He carried his traditional leather bag, containing a brief

or two, but felt it an incumbrance, and stood on the platform considering how it might be disposed of. The obvious plan was to send it home by a porter, but here rose two objections: first, it would announce his own arrival, and thus apprise Mrs. Chowler that he had left work prematurely; secondly, it involved a gratuity to the porter, which she would deem a piece of extravagance. Suddenly his eye lighted on the booking-clerk, and he struck out a third course.

"I wish you would take care of my bag for half an hour," he said, "I will call for it then."

The clerk was good-natured, and complied: so Dr. Chowler left the station unencumbered.

He bent his steps to Miss Cottle's, walking delicately, and arriving in perfect trim. His knock could be heard in the next house; in fact, it reached the ear of Mrs. Booles, and she flew to the window in one dwelling, as Midge, in her character of substitute, hurried to the door in the other.

"Oh! we've come, have we?" thought Mrs. Booles, "and as smart as an old pin. I

thought she was expecting us. She's in the garden, to be sure—but she'll come in now, deary!"

These observations were unuttered, but Mrs. Booles supposed herself to be addressing them to Dr. Chowler, and now went to spy how Annie would fulfil her expectation.

Miss Cottle's garden contained an arbour, which stood close to the fence, and Mrs. Booles had constructed a peep-hole which commanded the spot. This proved of great service, for the arbour was a haunt of Annie's, and Mrs. Booles liked to have her in view when she supposed herself secluded.

Annie and Miss Cottle were together when Midge hurried down the garden, and announced Dr. Chowler.

"I can see him in the summer-house," said Annie to Miss Cottle, "and you can go on with your gardening."

"How will he like that?" replied her timid hostess.

"Well, it is what I should prefer in mamma's absence, and though he might

to speak of her affairs before you, he can't object to your being in sight."

But object Dr. Chowler did—and almost as he appeared.

"Who is that old fright?" he said, as Annie invited him into the arbour.

Annie looked round. "Where?" she asked, naïvely.

Dr. Chowler coloured a little. "Can't that old woman leave her cabbages for a while? or better—shall we go into the house?"

"You will find it more agreeable here," answered Annie, in a cold tone. She took no notice of his allusion to Miss Cottle.

"So we are to look to the agreeable," he resumed. "You carry romance into everything, and impart it to everyone. To think of your meeting the learned of the law in a garden—the garden of Eden, I shall call it. You see, you can make a starched proctor poetic. How doth the little busy bee—" and he pointed to Miss Cottle—"roam from flower to flower: I don't know whether I have it quite correct, but I feel the spirit

of it." And he placed his hand on his breast.

His speech conciliated Annie, and she laughed.

"You are busy yourself, too," he continued—for Annie was knitting: "and you glide from stitch to stitch, as a bird from one twig to another."

"That isn't so pretty as roaming from flower to flower. You don't improve, Dr. Chowler, and I think poetry is not your vein, after all. But do tell me one thing—are there any tidings of my mamma?"

"What a sybil you are! Now you know this is what I have come about."

"Then I have guessed right! And you bring good news!"

"As far as it goes. Touton has traced her to within a mile of Walton, when the chaise was met by a private carriage, but where this went to he has been unable to discover—only he can hear nothing of it on the road, and he believes that it stopped by Walton. He has marked a house there, and I have sent him back to watch it."

"And that is all?" said Annie, disappointed.

"All! My dear young lady, you mustn't expect miracles. This is a great step, and I believe we shall know your mamma's abode within three days."

"Do you, really?"

"I do—really!" averred Dr. Chowler, in his gay way.

She was cheered by his words, and could not help smiling.

"Now I feel rewarded," resumed Dr. Chowler. "You see, I hurried off with the news directly it reached me, and left everything else to the winds. My one thought was to make you happy."

"I am very sensible of your kindness," said Annie, gratefully.

"I have something more to tell you. You wished me to do everything to delay the suit in the divorce-court. I am happy to say your papa can now take no proceedings till next term. The list of causes to be tried was closed to-day."

"I am so glad!" exclaimed Annie. Then

her colour faded, as if the satisfaction were mingled with pain.

"I can't conceive your motive for being glad. The divorce *must* come, and I should have thought the sooner the better."

"Why, so?"

"Because it will release your mamma from an equivocal position, and establish what you seem to desire—your own independence of your father."

Annie was silent.

"I see you are resigned to it now," said Dr. Chowler."

"On the contrary. I wish earnestly for delay."

"Why? you must tell me why, and I shall know better what to do."

A blush tinged Annie's cheek, but left it pale.

"I have a reason," she faltered.

Dr. Chowler recurred to his original notion that this, if truly stated, could be nothing but an apprehension that the annulment of the marriage would interfere with her own chances of matrimony, but Annie's

manner did not encourage him to pursue the subject, and at this moment, his ear caught the announcement that it was five by Surbiton clock, warning him to depart. So he rose to go, and Annie gave him her hand.

"You shall see me again in a few days, when we may be able to take your mamma into counsel," he said. "But I mustn't have you thinking too much. It is bad for the complexion, you know. Ah! now your roses are coming back."

He seemed to be talking to cover his detention of her hand, but Annie now drew it away, and he was obliged to go. He praised Miss Cottle's gardening as he passed, and wished her at Botany Bay.

Nobody was aware that the scene had another spectator. But Mrs. Booles, from the peep-hole of her observatory, had seen more than Miss Cottle had—indeed, more than occurred, and she only regretted there was not the same facility for hearing. But she caught a few stray words, and her imagination filled the void, indicating the nature

of Dr. Chowler's intrigue; and this she conceived it to be her bounden duty to communicate to his wife. Such a step required to be undertaken dramatically, and she decided to visit Mrs. Chowler in disguise, which would both insure secrecy, and be in keeping with the business; hence calculated to produce a greater impression.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DOMESTIC BLISS.

The parsimony of Mrs. Chowler had its weak side; for though it only pinched the parlour, it starved the kitchen, and this involved her in a chronic change of servants. It was in vain that she tried maidens of different countries, exhausted the registry-offices, and tapped the workhouses; no girls could be found without a stomach, and this oversight of Nature kept her in continual worry. Not only had all her servants stomachs, but she came to the conclusion that they were in that particular doubly provided, like the camel, and she daily wondered at the quantity they accommodated. Hence servants rarely stayed with her longer

than a month, though they departed at the cost of their character; for Mrs. Chowler either retained this credential as compensation or only surrendered it in a state too damaged for use.

She had now been some days without a housemaid, which threw a strain on the cook; and, therefore, Dr. Chowler, on returning from his interview with Annie, was not surprised to find the door opened by Arabella.

"That's right, Arry," he said, playfully, "help cookey!"

"Don't say a word—cook has gone," whispered Arabella.

"Then we have nobody?" rejoined the stunned doctor. "Why did you let her go?"

"She said her month was up, and she would go."

"Month up! You don't mean to say we have kept a servant a month," said the doctor, satirically.

"Now, don't *chaf*, or you will put mammair in a tantrum, and she is now very civil."

Mrs. Chowler, in fact, had determined to leave her partner no ground for grumbling, or as little as might be, considering that the hegira of servants was one of his grievances: so she hailed his appearance with smiles, and he might have been comforted, if smiles could comfort a man for the loss of his cook at dinner-time.

"We are all ready and waiting for you," she said, with a gush of affability. "But you arn't so tired, are you?—at least, you don't appear so. You really look as fresh as when you went out this morning—doesn't he, Arabella?"

"That he does!" agreed Arabella, anxious to keep the peace. "He is quite smairt."

"Fiddlestick!" said the doctor, a little soothed by the compliment, nevertheless.

"I do believe he has been combing his whiskers," cried Mrs. C., merrily.

Arabella joined in the laugh, and gave the whiskers a pull, which further gratified the doctor, who, besides possessing the vanity of man, was not used to such attentions from the ladies of his family.

"You are both in capital spirits," he said: "just in the mood for going a gipsying."

This was a little hit at the flight of the cook, and drew a deprecatory pinch from Arabella, but Mrs. Chowler would only see a joke.

"You look as if you had really been a gipsying," she retorted, waggishly.

The tables were now turned, and the doctor thought it wise to laugh, chiming in with the two ladies. Then Mrs. Chowler produced the cold mutton, Arabella brought up the potatoes, and they sat down to dinner. It was a spectacle for gods and men, not to mention women. Yet, perhaps, no neighbour could have thrown a stone if every house had been of glass, and disclosed all the meannesses within. Well is it, that one-half the world knows not how the other half lives!

The dinner was got over charmingly; and Dr. Chowler drank his two glasses of Marsala, and went to his study, and his briefs.

His departure was a relief to the ladies, whom he had kept at high pressure, and who could now relax, and let off their spleen. Mrs. Chowler had petted Arabella, to secure a curb on her father; and Arabella submitted, in order to prevent a battle royal. But each felt herself aggrieved, and each felt nettled. The mine needed but a spark, and the process of removing the dinner things supplied the want.

"What are you about?" cried Mrs. Chowler, as Arabella flounced past with the glasses: "you move like a dray-horse."

"Tray-horse, you mean," sneered Arabella: "that's what you are making me."

"I can't make you a lady."

"Nobody would expect it of you."

"No, particularly if they had seen you rowing on the river, with Alfred Mockright."

Here Arabella made the glasses ring.

"You'll break those glasses," cried Mrs. Chowler. "Do you think they are made of iron, like yourself."

"Why do you talk to me about Alfred Mockright?" answered Arabella.

"I shall talk as I like. How dare you speak to me that way?"

And Mrs. Chowler slapped Arabella's shoulder.

"You had better slap me again," said the young lady, her eyes flashing fire. "Alfred Mockright, indeed! Who set me on? But it is the *lairst* time you shall throw him up to me, I can tell you."

And Arabella flung from the room, banging the door behind.

Mrs. Chowler did not start in pursuit, being glad to end the altercation; and she sat down to recover herself. Her rage had gone off, and her breath, too, leaving the reflection that both had gone too far. She wished to encourage the siege of Alfred, and feared that her taunt had so stung Arabella, that she would now renounce the design. It was no consolation to reflect that Arabella would provoke a saint—particularly as Arabella had not begun the quarrel, and Mrs. Chowler never deemed herself a saint, and pondering over this rap about Alfred, the thoughtful mother could have bitten her

tongue out, if the operation had been painless, and as things stood, she nearly bit her nail off instead.

The nail was saved by a knock at the street-door—one of those faltering knocks, called a double-treble, indicating that the knocking party is doubtful about either his reception or his status. Who could it be? Be it whom it might, the door must be answered, and Mrs. Chowler considered that the service might be undertaken by herself more fitly than by Arabella. People should never descend on small establishments at unseasonable hours, *but they will*, and the office of porter is thus forced on many a fine lady, as on Mrs. Chowler. That good housewife was rather startled, on opening the door, to behold on the step a muffled figure, which instantly sidled in.

"I want to speak to Mrs. Chowler," whispered the visitor, mysteriously.

The garments were the garments of man, but the voice was the voice of woman; in fact, Mrs. Booles's.

"I am Mrs. Chowler."

"Oh!—you! ah! how d'ye do, ma'am? I am—am Mrs. Booles, ma'am."

"*Mrs.* Booles?" said Mrs. Chowler, after a pause of bewilderment, and another survey of her visitor's garments, which, to say truth, were the Sunday attire of *Mister* Booles.

"There's a reason for that, ma'am," replied the visitor, glancing at her dubious garb. "I've come to you in secret, because I might be watched. But we may be overheard here. Could we go into a private room, ma'am? for I have to tell you a very important matter. And servants"—Mrs. Booles pointed to the kitchen stairs—"have long ears, ma'am, and long tongues, too."

"I should be very sorry to trust any of them, but I am glad to say I am rid of the two wretches recently in my service, and who both left me in the most disgraceful manner. I am without a servant till to-morrow."

"Ah, I know what that is, ma'am. I've had great experience with servants; and I know them: I ought to—for I have kept twenty-eight."

"How many?"

Mrs. Booles repeated the number, which suggested to Mrs. Chowler that she had been in India, where, as she knew from some of the Surbiton Indians, it was not unusual for twenty or thirty servants to be kept by a washerwoman. But Mrs. Booles undeceived her on this point.

"I remember their all going away at once," she said, "and leaving me in that large house, with nobody but my cousin, Lady Angelina de Vere. And I don't know what I should have done but for her. She's above nothing, ma'am. She cooked the dinner, answered the door, and would have washed up, if I had let her. Such a treasure! She's now confidential lady's maid to the Queen, and I don't wonder at her Majesty saying she's worth her weight in gold."

Mrs. Chowler now became a little frightened.

"I must beg you to come to the point," she said, nervously.

Mrs. Booles cast her eyes around—towards the backstairs, and towards the stairs of

state, and on each side—thus making sure there were no listeners.

"It's about Dr. Chowler I've come, ma'am—your husband. He is—you may believe it or not, ma'am—he's like all the men." Mrs. Booles made a motion of her head, intimating thereby a low opinion of the sex. But Mrs. Chowler fired up at the reflection on the doctor.

"What have you to say against him?" she demanded.

"It's what he has said against *you*, ma'am, calling you an old fright—such a beautiful creature, I wonder he isn't ashamed of himself. But let me put you on your guard, ma'am. He intends to get a divorce."

"Who told you this?"

"I heard him tell *her*, ma'am. You know the party I mean, ma'am: the girl who lodges at that shameless Miss Cottle's, and who comes here teaching."

"You can't mean Miss Staunton?"

"Nobody else, ma'am—nobody else! The young lady, as I suppose she calls herself, hasn't deceived me with her prim looks—

leastways, not since I've seen her constantly meeting a married man, and that man Dr. Chowler, leaving his beautiful wife at home. But they're all alike, ma'am. Booles is just the same, though I gave up all for him, and I believe he's now after that creature Miss Cottle."

"But Dr. Chowler has business with Miss Staunton," urged Mrs. Chowler, excitedly.

"Yes, ma'am—more business than you, in your trustfulness, think of: very pretty business indeed, ma'am. He is waylaying her, and visiting her whenever he can; and to-day he comes all spruced up, if you please, and I saw he'd even combed his whiskers."

Mrs. Chowler here broke into perspiration. "I once told Jane—I believe you visit Jane, ma'am: she's now married to Major Noseworthy—I told her that men didn't comb their whiskers without intentions, and so it turned out in her case, and so it will in this, ma'am, if you don't assert your rights. You don't know the men, ma'am, I can see. I've followed Booles—often when he's thought me slaving at home, as I mostly am, and I

know the men, ma'am. And I tell you to follow—yes, ma'am: watch him if you don't believe me, and you'll see with your own eyes."

"See what, my good woman?"

"See him courting her, ma'am—the good-for-nothing that she is! for I don't blame the men half so much as the women. Does anybody mean to say they'd come on, if the women didn't encourage it? No, ma'am! It's her glancing and smirking and tossing her head, if you please, that's brought Dr. Chowler into her net."

This tirade went into one of Mrs. Chowler's ears, and did not wholly go out at the other, for, though she ejected Mrs. Booles's conclusions, there remained a residuum of facts which she could not clear up. To her the terrible word "divorce," which so agitated Mrs. Booles, merely intimated that the Doctor had been speaking to Annie on professional business, in which she knew him to be engaged for her mother; and she had too much sense to regard Annie as a rival. But, on the other hand, the Doctor must have

behaved with great lightness, or he would not have attracted the notice of Mrs. Booles; and, furthermore, he had abstained from mentioning his visits to Annie, which showed a consciousness that they were not altogether correct. Hence, Mrs. Chowler, without being jealous, was annoyed, and the more as she saw the possibility of Mrs. Booles making the affair a town talk. So she spoke smooth to Mrs. Booles to win her silence, at the same time assuring her that she knew all about the Doctor's visits to Annie, that they were connected with a lawsuit, and that what she overheard referred to the proceedings. This communication, which she saw was disagreeable to her visitor, she backed up with a glass of gin: whereupon Mrs. Booles took the hint, and went off quietly, Mrs. Chowler inviting her to come again.

"Not like Jane!" thought Mrs. Booles, reverting to the faithless Mrs. Major Noseworthy. "She slammed the door in my face. But what could you expect from a cook!"

At this moment Dr. Chowler had finished his briefs, and was lolling in his chair, con-

templating vacancy—yet not quite vacancy; for he saw the figure of Annie in imagination. His feeling for Annie was a kind of intoxication. It had begun insensibly, and gone on gradually, and now it had power to make him a fool. He thought no evil—at least he meant none. What he laid out for himself was to become her Mentor: to take advantage of the absence of her natural protectors, and accustom her to look to him. Thus he would acquire her confidence, and imperceptibly steal into little privileges, such as being allowed to pat her cheek, smooth her tresses, or kiss her hand—a paternal affair, yet with a smack of devilment in it, just sufficient to make it go pleasant.

His dream was dispelled by the entrance of Mrs. Chowler, whose aspect, though the smack of devilment was not wanting, looked anything but pleasant.

"Hilloa! what now?" he cried, sniffing hostilities. "You have been setting fire to your face."

"You had better call me an old fright at once," suggested Mrs. Chowler, breathlessly.

Now the doctor had just been thinking of the name he had called Miss Cottle, and here it turned up! What could this signify? His legal acumen instantly divined a signification, connecting it with the knock he had heard at the door; and, used to putting this and that together, he concluded that Miss Cottle had overheard the epithet, and revenged herself by tattling to his wife.

"I can't say you are an *old* fright," he rejoined, with a good-humour that made him more provoking, "nor will I admit you could be a fright at all; but I have certainly seen you looking handsomer."

"You wicked man, I know what you mean," answered Mrs. Chowler. "You want beauty at your time of life, do you? And you insinuate that mine is gone!"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"What did you dress yourself up for, when you left your office to-day?—tell me that!"

"I tell you to look after your servants if you can get any to stop with you: mind your own business, and I'll mind mine."

"Your business!—it's a pretty business,

sneaking away from your office, while I am toiling and pinching at home."

"You may toil as much as you like, but I'll be hanged if you shall go on pinching," answered Chowler, growing irate. "I'll give this house a new mistress."

Mrs. Chowler now thought it time to assume, if she did not feel jealousy, in order that she might utilise the ammunition received from Mrs. Booles.

"You villain, you tell me this to my face!"

"To your face or your back. The housekeeping shall be done by Arabella in future."

Mrs. Chowler laughed in the style of a hyena. "You must get your divorce, first," she said; "then it won't be Arabella, you know. It wasn't for her you took a half-holiday, to-day."

"I took no half-holiday. I came by the 4.30 train, instead of the 5 o'clock, and on business, and my business you undertook never to interfere with. I went straight to Miss Staunton—"

"Did you, indeed." And Mrs. Chowler split with laughter, though it was rather strained.

"Yes, to Miss Staunton, my client. I am glad you find it amusing. She doesn't, poor young lady!"

"So you combed your whiskers for *her*, you wretch!" said Mrs. Chowler, becoming more furious as the ground for complaint gave way under her feet.

"You are actually jealous, are you?" retorted her lord, derisively, but with flushed cheek. "So now the cat is out!"

"You villain, you shan't call me a cat for nothing!" And Mrs. Chowler flew at his face. But she was intercepted by Arabella, who, here rushing into the room, seized her hands.

"Mamair, mamair! what are you doing?" she said, deprecatingly.

"You leave the room!" replied her mother, wrestling to free herself.

"Oh! pray be quiet, dear!" implored Arabella.

And she made a beseeching gesture to her

father, who sat like Impatience on a monument, smiling at Rage.

"I *will* mark him—I'll spoil his beauty!" cried Mrs. Chowler.

"I'll scream, if you move," said Arabella, growing desperate.

"You dare!" And Mrs. Chowler broke away.

Arabella rushed to the window, and threw it up. Now it was Mrs. Chowler who became alarmed. She saw danger to her "position," and that the danger could be averted only by retreat, so she submitted to the humiliation, and, with muttered threats, quitted the room. Then Arabella closed the window, and sat down.

"How miserable I am!" she exclaimed. "I wish I was dead!" And she burst into tears.

The doctor felt that he was paying for his frolic.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ESHER COMMON.

While Annie, without knowing it, was exciting this commotion in the household of Dr. Chowler, Jessie was considering how she could induce her to return to the protection of her father. Jessie desired to effect this object on several grounds. She not only thought Annie out of her sphere at Surbiton, but she found herself so; and she reflected that she might now secure for both the luxury of Mr. Blandford's abode, with the command of horses, carriages, and servants, and access to the best society. There Jessie herself would enjoy the pleasures of a good position, and might carry out her design of making a suitable marriage—for,

strange to say, she ignored the prospect opened to her of a union with Mr. Blandford. At the same time, her reasons for desiring the change did not shut out consideration for Annie. Annie was the person in the world she liked best, and she felt a real interest in her welfare. She wished her to enjoy the advantages her father could give, and use them to help her also to a brilliant destiny. Once or twice, indeed, she thought of Annie in connexion with Harrifield. Had Annie been captivated by the handsome man-of-the-world, or, worse still, had he been fascinated by *her?* The question threw Jessie in a fever for the moment, though she had given up Harrifield, and determined on a course which would place her beyond his reach, even if he sought her with honourable intentions. But in this determination she deceived herself—indeed, purposely shut her eyes to the secret workings in her bosom, and which had been set in motion by Harrifield's reappearance. For the time, however, she saw no ground for beholding a rival in Annie, only it was de-

sirable to get her out of Harrifield's path; and in her eagerness, she forgot that thrusting Annie into fashionable society was not the way to accomplish this object. Her plan was developed with consummate art, or artfulness. She advanced by degrees, and opened a fresh parallel at every step, thus creeping, as it were, up to the citadel. She began with praises of Mr. Blandford, to which Annie listened, not only with patience, but with evident pleasure. This led her into a digression about her own father, to whom she had been disobedient, she said; and therefore, could never think of him without reproaching herself. Her regrets had an effect on Annie, and made her very grave for the rest of the evening, a mood which Jessie took care not to disturb.

Next day Annie came in from her teaching, fagged, and Jessie went into a tirade against what she called "governessing," bringing forward its vexations with a minuteness that Annie, fresh from their infliction, recognised as too truthful. Then she compared the suburban world with the

world of fashion, and ran into a description of fashionable life, and its pleasures —the balls, concerts, entertainments, and banquets which enlivened every day and every night. The recital interested Annie, for whom it had the fascination natural to her age; and, perhaps, she now first realised what she had given up. Jessie saw the opportunity, and struck in while the impression remained.

"All this is within your reach, Annie," she said. "You may have your carriage to ride in, the first milliners in London to attend you, jewellery, opera, the pleasures of shopping, your canter in Rotten Row, and a train of admirers; and you, silly child, prefer slaving here in Surbiton, submitting to the awful cockneyism of the people who set themselves up as its aristocracy, forsooth. Remember, you can't touch pitch without being defiled, and you can't be in daily contact with these creatures without acquiring something of their tone."

"I hope I haven't deteriorated very much

as yet," answered Annie, with a laugh, though tears were in her eyes.

"Well, I can't say you have improved."

"And, in my case, not to advance, is to recede. I daresay I talk loud in public, like the ladies showing off on the railway platform; or I walk as if I fancied myself the observed of all observers, like Miss Giddy, or I stand up with my back to the fire like Mrs. Bustle; or I look the other way, when I see people I don't want to recognise, as Mrs. Chowler does. These things are catching, I know. But I am safe from contagion to a great extent; for when I come away from these creatures, as you call them, I enter the atmosphere freshened by Jessie Balcombe, and then all my vulgarity evaporates."

"I hope you, at least, find Jessie Balcombe a safety-valve for the spleen, which a morning with such people must excite in you."

"I assure you some of these people are as agreeable as Jessie Balcombe—perhaps even as ornamental. And what is more they

are kind—and what is more they don't find fault with me—and what is—"

But here she was encircled by Jessie's arms, and her mouth stopped by a kiss, which gave her time both to recover breath and stem the torrent of words.

"This is the first quarrel we have had—and all through my zeal for your good," said Jessie; "all because I want to reconcile you to your papa—whom you can't help liking, I am sure."

"No, I can't help liking him, but this isn't from anything he has done, but in spite of what he has done."

"Of what he contemplates, you mean," rejoined Jessie; "it isn't done yet: it may never be done."

Annie glanced up.

"He may move no further in this matter—at least, he may never carry it to an issue," said Jessie, looking a little disquieted, "and why should you forego a present good from dread of a future evil? The present we know, and can make sure of, but what is to happen hereafter is beyond our apprehension. *Time will tell.*"

"Yes—only time, but that fact cuts me off from home, and from papa. Now, Jessie, let us drop the subject, and go out for a little sketching."

"With all my heart," said Jessie, too adroit to force a decision, and not dissatisfied with her progress. "But where shall we go?"

This was a question difficult to settle, and Annie called in their hostess, to whom, as one acquainted with the neighbourhood, the point was referred.

But Miss Cottle's notions of the picturesque were limited, and she could only recommend Hampton Court Palace, which neither of the young ladies thought appropriate; so they determined first to dine, and then sally forth in what direction chance might dictate.

Dinner was hurried forward, and they were ready to start by three o'clock, when their steps turned towards the Portsmouth Road. The sun shone brightly, but not oppressively, and the air was tempered by a breeze which made walking a pleasure. A

quarter of an hour carried them through the straggling street of Ditton, and brought them to the Green, where they felt themselves in the country, and their spirits rose as they left houses behind. Jessie shared Annie's vivacity, and chatted away, acting on her avowed principle—not always so triumphant, of forgetting everything but the present. So they passed under a railway-bridge, and crossed a long tract, called Ditton Marsh, where another railway-bridge spanned the entrance to Esher common. The distance showed the spire of Esher Church, rising from a cluster of trees, and forming a little picture, which caught Jessie's eye, and reminded her of the object of their ramble.

"There is a subject for you, Annie," she said, "pretty, and yet easy. Now we can have a sketching match, and see who will be done first. Sit down on this bank."

"I know a bank where the wild thyme grows," answered Annie, "but this is not the one. The church view may do for a Rosa Bonheur like you, but it is beyond a

novice like me. I shall take that farmhouse, and your picture will be as good from there as here: so pray come over there."

The house stood on the verge of the common, and was a quaint old pile, to which an oak or two gave a picturesque appearance. Recognising its points, Jessie accepted Annie's proposal, and they crossed to the front. Here they sat down on the grass, Annie facing one way, and Jessie the other; and respectively began their tasks.

The spot was solitary, though only a stone's throw from the high road, and though skirted by another road, running to Claygate. But the girls did not feel timid; for the farmhouse seemed a protection on one hand, and the other offered the refuge of a turnpike, while the loneliness was further broken by the occasional passage of a cart, or other vehicle. And the prospect was cheerful. The May sun lit up the green; the flatness of the common was relieved by a border of trees, and, beyond this, the eye rested complacently on the

distant village spire and its circling woods. To the left rose a curl of smoke, marking a gipsy encampment, but this was not near enough to be an annoyance, and for a long interval they heard no sound but of birds. These, however, kept the air alive; for overhead sang a lark, blackbirds whistled from the oaks, and a linnet trilled his wood-notes from the hedge, and the two girls, though of such different temperaments, plied their pencils in equal enjoyment of the concert.

After a time, the thud of horses' feet on the grass caused Annie to look up, and she beheld two horsemen, who proved to be Alfred Mockright and Mr. Ravel. She dropped her veil, but too late to escape the lawyer's recognition, and both he and Alfred reined up.

Her appearance was not such a surprise to Mr. Ravel as she imagined. He was, in fact, on his way from Walton, where he had been closeted with her father; and Mr. Blandford, having now occasion for his advice, had confided to him his discovery at Surbiton. Thus the lawyer was composed

while Annie could not repress a blush, though he made his salutation as reassuring as possible.

"This is Miss Balcombe," Annie said, rallying, and laying a stress on Jessie's name—for she knew it was familiar to Mr. Ravel. "You and Miss Balcombe have met before, Mr. Mockright."

Alfred, indeed, had instantly recognised Jessie, and now offered her his hand, though a little thrown off his balance to find her and Annie acquainted with the lawyer.

"I am afraid we are intruders, and interrupt a pleasant employment," he said. "May we hope to see your sketches?"

"Mine is not in a state for exhibition," answered Annie. "But Miss Balcombe can show hers. Hers are presentable at any stage."

Jessie did not catch this compliment, being at the moment accosted by Mr. Ravel.

"I believe my request is unreasonable," continued Alfred, "so I shall not press it—only I wonder what you could find to sketch here, unless it was the gipsy encampment."

"A gipsy encampment would be charming, but where is there one?" replied Annie.

"Over there. Don't you see the smoke curling up?"

"Ah, yes! I see now." And she turned to Jessie. "Only think of a gipsy encampment! May we venture into it? I should so like to sketch one?"

"There can be no objection to that, if you don't have your fortune told," answered Jessie.

"And is it penal to be told your fortune?" asked Annie.

"Not if you have faith," observed Alfred.

"Or credulity," said Jessie.

Mr. Ravel made no remark, but furtively watched Annie.

"I doubt if I am qualified," said Annie, "so I shall give up fortune-hunting, and confine myself to sketching. Let us go, Jessie, if you think it is prudent." And she bent to the two gentlemen, and was turning away, when Alfred proffered his escort.

"And I hope you will permit me to be

of the party," said Mr. Ravel—"for my own sake, rather than yours, as I am afraid I can be of no service. Nor can I remain, indeed, more than a few minutes."

He received a polite response, and they all walked on together, the two gentlemen leading their nags, and Alfred keeping at Annie's side.

END OF VOL. I.

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